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RIDERS OF THE PURGATORY TRAIL
A COMPLETE STEVE REESE NOVEL

RANGE RIDERS WESTERN

20c
APR.

RIDERS OF THE PURGATORY TRAIL

a Steve Reese novel by
JOSEPH CHADWICK

DAUNTLESS THE PIONEER

a Sun Bear Valley story by
HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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A Department Conducted by JOHN A. THOMPSON

IT TAKES two to go trout fishing, cowboy style. You and your horse. And both had better know what they are doing. Trout fishing from the hurricane deck of a saddle pony is a tricky sport.

Horseback fishing, as practised in the cold, clear mountain streams of the West, is something any angler ought to try once. Having tried it, he'll find wading a purling brook in search of an illusive rainbow tame by comparison.

The uninitiated in saddle fishing is likely to rise up and claim that a horse splashing through a trout stream will scare the daylights out of the proverbially shy fish. Old hands at the game pooh-pooh this tenderfoot notion.

Saddle fishing came natural to the men who rode, and still ride the West. You know how it is with cowboys. They hate to walk, and will try 'most anything from horseback. Including trout fishing.

Moreover a fellow on horseback can follow the back trails. He can take the high paths twisting through the mountains that will lead him to the little-fished headwaters.

He doesn't need a creel either. His saddle bag will hold his catch. His rod can be carried broken down in the rifle scabbard at the side of his horse. When he is ready to fish he simply pulls it out and puts it together.

As for bait the dyed-in-the-wool Westerner on a saddle fishing trip is likely to rely on nature. Chances are he'll catch himself a grab of grasshoppers when he reaches his destination and trust the trout will snatch at them. On occasion he may take along a few of his favorite flies in case the fish are feeling fussy.

There is just one hitch to horseback fishing. That is landing the big ones. Small trout, legal size of course, are easy enough to handle from the saddle of a cowpony.

But if a granddaddy trout takes a hook cast from your seat in the saddle you and your horse are in for some fast action—or a lost fish. The big trout that require netting to land are hard to capture from horseback. It can be done if you've a companion with a net.

COWPONIES trained to hold back on a roped calf just naturally take to saddle fishing. They catch on quickly. Once the hook is set and the battle with Mr. Rainbow begins they will hold and stand and seem to know what is going on as well as the man in the saddle. Some of them seem to enjoy it just as much too. They will stand with extreme patience while the fisherman aboard them makes cast after cast trying to tempt a fish with his bait.

Aside from the added thrill of being atop a horse, saddle fishing for trout follows pretty much the general pattern of Western trout fishing.

In the first place always remember that brook trout are essentially cold water fish. They prefer clear, cold streams in mountain country and frequently settle in spots where the stream current will carry food to them.

Books have been written on how best to catch trout—and what with. But nobody knows all the answers.

There are some things concerning trout, however, that are well worth remembering. Fish or no, they are smart. They are also sly, cunning as a fox, and suspicious as a turkey the day before Thanksgiving.

Notice that small or average size brook trout do most of their darting around after food tidbits in open water. That is often because some older, bigger trout has claimed for himself an excellent, nearby, protected feeding place such as a quiet pool and is keeping the little fellows off his chosen range. Trout will do that.

Watch those open water trout carefully. You may discover one reason why you are not netting as many of them as you should.

The smaller fellows move around in lightning-

fast dashes following this and that downstream, not quite sure what it is. Suddenly they will make a fast snatch at an insect. Perhaps the next dart will be at a tiny piece of twig. Notice how they eject the bit of stick almost as soon as it enters their mouth.

HERE'S the lesson. These younger fish are still trying out things, discovering what is good to eat and what is not. And they make split-second decisions, spitting out anything not to their liking.

Young trout will use the same split-second speed rejecting an artificial fly unless you are fast enough to set the hook the instant they sample the bait.

This necessity for quick hook setting does not apply in the same degree to the bigger, older trout. It is not that the big boys are any slower. They just have more confidence in themselves. As a rule a trout in the jubilee class wastes little time tasting strange items. When he makes a lunge at something, he thinks he knows what he is getting. Instead of taking a little preliminary nibble, he indulges in a good bite.

This gives the man who knows his fish a trifle more time to come across with the quick snap, or the fast roll of the wrist that will lodge the hook firmly.

Once you have your fish on your line, the rest is up to you and the trout. Or up to you, your horse and the trout if you are doing your fishing Western cowboy style from the saddle of a cowpony.

The sooner you cook your trout after you have caught them, the richer their flavor will be. Add the aroma of wood smoke from a camp fire, your own outdoors appetite, and the taste of a succulent trout is something out of this world.

If there is going to be any sizable time lapse between catching and eating, your fish to be kept fresh must be protected from moisture and heat. If you are fishing close to camp, clean the fish, cut off their heads, wipe dry inside and hang in a cool shady place. If you have a trip ahead of you, clean, wipe dry, rub a little salt along the spine and wrap each fish separately.

Stow the fish in your saddlebag, fold up your rod and point your horse for home, or camp. And if the day has been your first eventful introduction to saddle fishing some Western mountain stream, we'll bet dollars to doughnuts it won't be your last. You'll be impatient for the next try.

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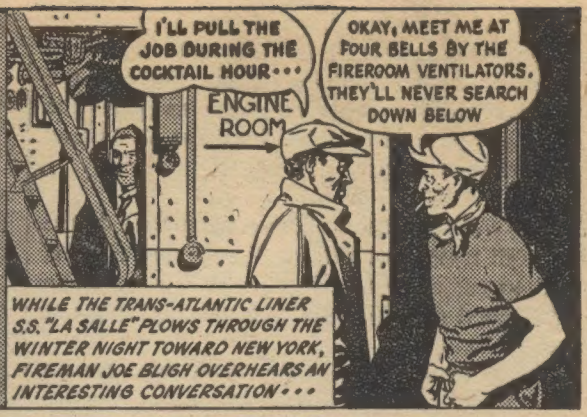
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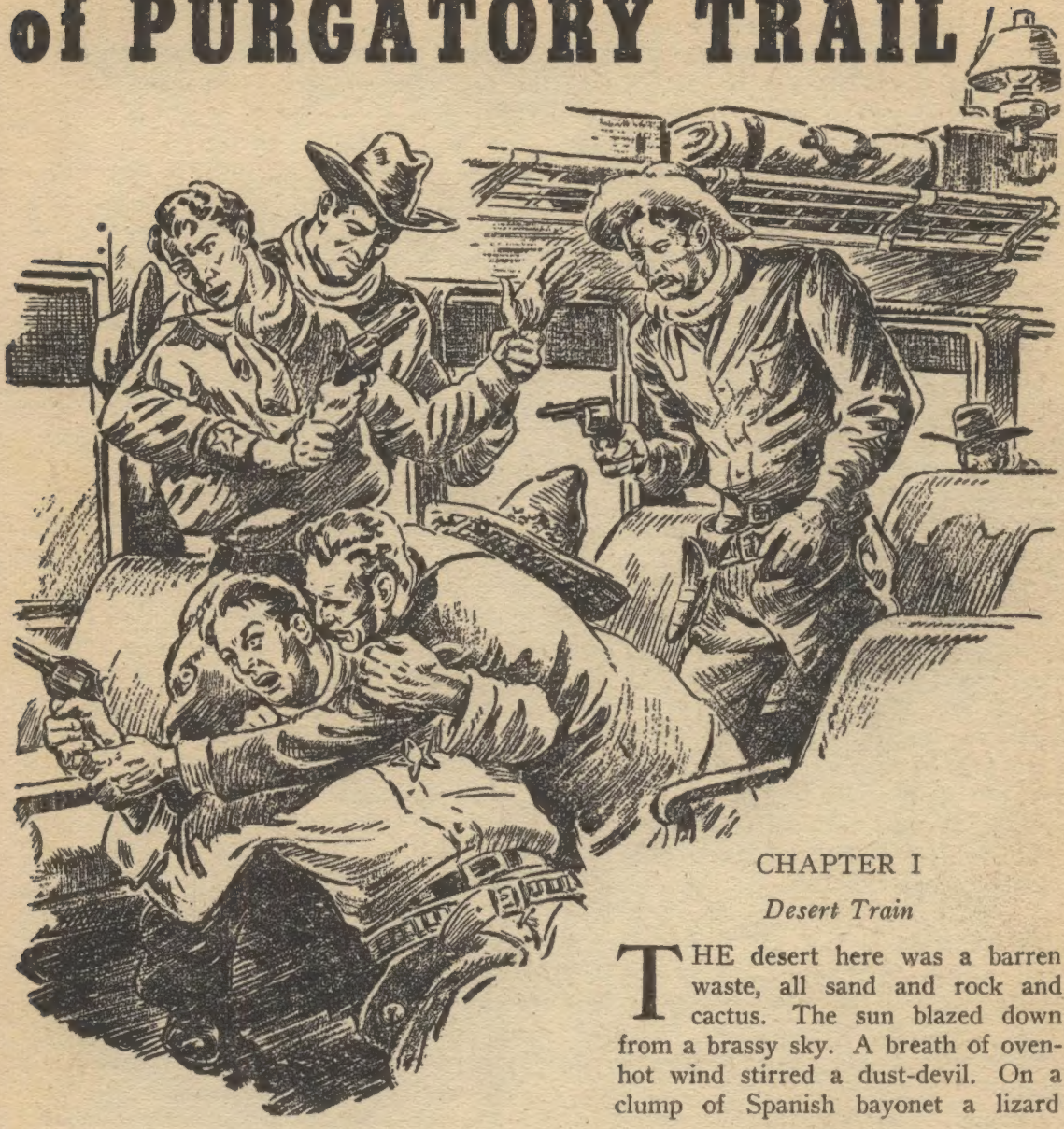

CHAPTER I

Desert Train

THE desert here was a barren waste, all sand and rock and cactus. The sun blazed down from a brassy sky. A breath of oven-hot wind stirred a dust-devil. On a clump of Spanish bayonet a lizard

The theft of a prize bull leads the West's most fearless lawmen into a roaring maelstrom of rebels, rustlers and renegades!

A Steve Reese Novel by JOSEPH CHADWICK

stalked a sand fly, and a rattlesnake dozed in the scant shade of a bleached steer skull.

Three horsemen reined in atop a rocky rise to rest their blowing, lathered mounts. And to curse the desert.

They were tough-visaged men. Each wore a six-gun at his right thigh and carried a rifle in his saddle-boot. Their faces were sullen, and smeared with sweat and dust. One had a spare horse in tow.

"Some short-cut you picked, Fargo," he growled. "How much farther is it, anyway?" He was a swarthy, angular-faced man.

The man, Fargo, to whom he spoke, was thick of body, ruddy of complexion. A tobacco cud bulged his left cheek.

"Use your eyes, Mr. Black," he said, with heavy sarcasm, "and you'll see it."

The third rider, a mere youth with smooth cheeks but agate-hard eyes, said:

"There it is, Blackie. Only a couple miles."

Dimly seen through the shimmering heat haze at the far rim of the desert was the only man-made thing in all that expanse of malpais. It was drum-shaped, a muddy-yellow. The hard-cased trio rode on toward it.

It was a railroad water tank, and a single track ran beside it. The rails, gleaming in the sunlight, ran east and west across the desert emptiness. Reaching the tank the horsemen halted, dismounted. Fargo got rid of his cud, had a pull at his canteen, then took a fresh chew. "Blackie" lighted a short-butted cigar. The "Kid" flopped to the ground, his back against one of the tank's timber supports, and rolled a cigarette.

"You sure the train stops here?" Blackie asked.

"That's a fool question," Fargo said. "The engine's got to take on water, don't it?" He took a deputy sheriff's badge from his pocket, pinned it to his shirt front. "We'll go aboard and collar this Mexican, see? It's got to look like an arrest. If there's any trouble, you two back me up. If there's any argument, I'll claim the hombre is a rustler or a smuggler. But no matter what, we're taking him off that train."

"How'll we know him?" the Kid asked. "Maybe there'll be more than one Mexican aboard."

"He's got a knife-scar across his left cheek," Fargo replied. "I'll know him, all right. . . ."

STEVE REESE, star man of the Cattlemen's Protective Association, and field chief, half-dozed as the westbound train crawled across the desert. He was too uncomfortable to sleep. The blinds were drawn on the windows along the south side of the coach, keeping out the glare of the Arizona sun. But nothing could keep out the stifling heat. Or the smoke from the engine. There were only a dozen other passengers in the coach and, with one exception, they looked even more uncomfortable than he felt.

The exception occupied a seat across the aisle, and he was a Mexican who had come aboard at El Paso. He wore his coat in spite of the heat. He looked natty in his new blue serge suit, white shirt and maroon string tie. He had placed his sombrero up on the luggage rack with a new-looking valise. He made Steve Reese, in range clothes, appear a bit shabby.

The Mexican was smoking a brown-paper cigarette. His profile, Reese decided, was handsome. Good features, showing firm character, high intelligence. It was a good mingling of Spanish and Indian blood.

Somewhere behind Reese sat a young couple with a baby. So far the infant had been quiet, but now it suddenly broke into anguished crying. The Mexican turned and looked back, and Reese saw his full-face.

It was something of a shock.

The man's left cheek was badly disfigured by a jagged scar running from the lobe of the ear to the corner of the mouth. The shock was caused by the realization that one side of his face was handsome and the other downright ugly. He smiled, shifting his dark gaze to Reese.

"There is music in the crying of a *nino*, eh, senor?" he said. The smile was half-pleasant grin, half-hideous grimace. His English was

good, though heavily accented. "When it is not crying because of illness, of course."

Reese smiled, nodded. He took out "makings," rolled a cigarette, but discovered that he had no matches. The Mexican noticed, and said, "Allow me, senor." He crossed the aisle, offered the CPA matches, then, asking, "May I?" took the seat facing Reese.

Reese said, "Thanks," taking the matches.

The Mexican murmured, *"Por nada."* He watched Reese light up, and his eyes were as

STEVE REESE

shrewd as they were dark. "I think that I have seen you before, senor."

"Maybe. I get around quite a bit. Reese is the name. I'm with the Cattlemen's Protective Association. I'm in the field mostly, working out of Austin, Texas."

The Mexican nodded. "I have heard of you, Senor Reese," he said. "I am Juan Morales. In my country, I am a sergeant in *los rurales.*"

Reese looked at him with interest. Morales had spoken modestly, but with pride. And he had much to be proud of, being a member of the famed rurales. In Mexico the rurales were a police force much like the Texas Rangers in the Lone Star State. They were great man-hunters, brave fighting men, and had proved their worth uncounted times

"And I know the rurales, Senor Morales," Reese said.

They smiled at each other with mutual respect, the handsome American who looked like an ordinary cowhand, and the dapper half-handsome, half-ugly Mexican. They smoked as the train rolled on across the scorched desert, a bond of camaraderie growing between them.

The CPA man wondered vaguely what mission had brought Morales to the American side of the Border. Or perhaps the Mexican was merely taking a holiday. Reese's own trip to Arizona Territory was supposed to be a vacation. His chief, Colonel Beauvine, CPA's shrewd director, had told him:

"You deserve a rest, Steve. Why not take a trip?" He'd smiled ironically. "Say to Valido, Arzona. You could combine business and pleasure."

Reese's interest had been aroused, for never before had Beauvine so casually assigned him to a case. The explanation had been simple enough, however. It wasn't much of a case. The CPA had been asked by one of its members, a Chicago firm operating a big Arizona ranch, to investigate the theft of a single cow. And the Chicago outfit had urged Colonel Beauvine to put his best man on the case.

The colonel had smiled wryly, and said: "Tenderfeet, Steve. But it's an important outfit, and so we'll humor them. Only bankers who know nothing about the cattle business would get worked up about the loss of a single critter."

THE Arizona spread was the Crescent Ranch, called locally the Quarter-Moon. It was ramrodded by a man named Matt Toliver. The telegram from Chicago had said

that Tolliver had urged the banking firm to call in the CPA.

"Maybe I do need a vacation—over in Arizona," Reese had said to his chief.

Now, nearing his destination, he had become increasingly sure that there was more to this case than met the eye. Matt Tolliver was a cattleman from away back, and it wasn't likely that such a man would be worked up about a single cow unless something more was at stake.

On that assumption, Reese had wired two fellow CPA operatives who were his constant companions in the field when necessity arose —"Dusty" Trail and Hank Ball—to meet him in Valido. Reese would meet them there and find out what information they had picked up before his arrival, regarding Quarter-Moon Ranch. It was his way of working. He always liked to have his two aides in the field early, looking over the lay of the land.

"Senor, you are troubled about something?"

Reese gave a slight start. He had been so lost in thought he had forgotten Juan Morales.

"Just a small problem," he said, smiling. "Did it show on my face that I was puzzled?"

"A deep frown, senor."

"I don't usually let my face be so easily read."

"It is just that I am a student of men's faces, *amigo.*"

"This is a small thing," said Reese. "So small it makes me wonder. A matter of one cow being stolen."

"Ah?" Morales murmured. "That is interesting."

"You think so, too?"

"When a man makes trouble over one cow. . . . Well, it is suspicious."

Reese nodded. They were in agreement there.

"Especially," he said, "when the man is boss of a big ranch. Maybe I shouldn't talk about it, but—" he shrugged—"I might be starting my investigation right here on this train. This man is foreman-manager of a Border outfit, the Quarter-Moon. You've heard of it?"

"*Si.* And the man is Senor Matt Tolliver."

"You know him, Morales?"

"I have encountered him," Morales replied. "He comes down into Sonora at times. Tough hombres, all the Tollivers."

Reese's interest sharpened. "All?" he said.

Before Morales could reply the train, having slowed, came to a jolting stop.

Reese looked from the open window, saw that the train had stopped at a water tank. Four saddle horses were ground-hitched in the shade of the tank. Leaning from the window, he saw three tough-looking men talking to the conductor who had descended from the coach ahead. There was some argument, then abruptly the burliest member of the trio pushed the trainman aside and boarded the train. His companions followed him. The conductor looked after them, then shrugged.

"*Que es eso?*" Morales asked. "What is it?"

"Nothing much," Reese replied. "Three hombres just boarded the coach ahead. The engine is taking on water."

Shortly the three hard-cases entered Reese's coach. They halted just inside the door, looking over each passenger in turn. Steve Reese found himself the target of their sharp scrutiny, then the burly man dismissed Reese as he had the other passengers, with a shake of his head and a muttered word to his companions.

Morales half rose from his seat and looked back. Instant recognition showed in the burly tough's eyes, and he drew his gun.

"That's the hombre!" he said loudly, and came striding along the aisle.

Morales looked surprised, but not alarmed. He rose, faced the three.

"You look for me?" he said quietly. "Why?"

Reese now saw the deputy sheriff's badge pinned to the burly man's shirt. He also saw that the deputy had cocked his gun, and kept it pointed at the Mexican. The other two had not drawn their weapons, but they watched Morales with a wary intentness.

"Your name Morales? Juan Morales?"

"*Si.*"

"Deputy Sheriff Jake Fargo is mine. You're under arrest, Morales."

"On what charge, senor?"

"Rustling. If that ain't enough, then smuggling, too."

Reese reined in and spoke sharply: "Turn her loose, Stallman!" (CHAP. XIV)

"But, senor, there must be some mistake!"

Fargo gestured with his gun. "Don't you make a mistake, hombre," he warned. "It'd be a fatal one, sure. Kid, search him for a gun. Watch it now. He's a tricky one."

THE Kid, a hard-eyed youth, edged around behind Morales, began going over the Mexican for concealed weapons. Morales informed that his gun was in his valise on the luggage rack. The Kid paid no attention.

Steve Reese watched uneasily. Morales looked too bewildered to be guilty. But something more bothered the CPA field chief, and suddenly he knew what it was. His memory was a retentive file. He had trained himself to remember the faces of criminals, had developed the faculty to such a degree that, before he had come west to join the CPA he had risen to the rank of lieutenant of detectives on the St. Louis Police Force.

Now he remembered Jake Fargo's heavy, ruddy face. The man was badly wanted by the Texas Rangers. How had such a man come by a law badge? Had some sheriff been negligent, in swearing Jake Fargo in as a peace officer?

CHAPTER II

Fake Arrest

SUSPICION welled in Reese's mind.

He believed that Morales had spoken the truth about being a rurale. There was something queer about his being arrested for rustling and smuggling—by a man who had no right to a law badge.

There was something odd about a deputy sheriff boarding a train in the middle of the desert to make an arrest. It began to look like a frame-up to Steve Reese.

"He's got no gun on him," the Kid said.

"All right," Fargo said. "Let's go."

Morales still showed no fear, but he was troubled. "Senores," he said, "you are making a mistake. I—"

The Kid jerked out his gun, lifted it threateningly, reversing it. "You walking off this train?" he demanded. "Or do we drag you off?" His gun-barrel was poised above Morales' head.

It was not in Steve Reese's nature to remain silent in the face of brutality and injustice. He rose quickly.

"Hold it!" he said, and his harsh tone would have stayed the hand of a better man than this hard-cased youth.

The Kid checked his blow, swung toward the CPA man.

Fargo shifted his murky gaze toward Reese, and so did the swarthy man behind the burly deputy.

They must have seen something in his square-cut bronzed face that hinted at danger, that unnerved them. They stared at him wordlessly, their bravado wavering. They must have sensed, despite his cowhand clothes, that he was no ordinary range rider.

His dark eyes took them all in, alert and unwavering as they studied him. He was a tall man, earnest of manner, a handsome man prematurely gray at the temples, giving him a distinguished look, even in his humble garb. He wore a pair of .38 Colts at his thighs, and his hands, as slim and supple as a surgeon's, hovered near those guns. Those Colts were the tools of his trade, not mere showy pretense, and no man in the country was more skillful than he in their use. Yet he was reluctant to use them now, as always, for to Steve Reese guns should be used only as a last resort, when all else failed.

"Senor Morales is a friend of mine," he said. "I want to know more about this business before he's gun-whipped and dragged off this train—and taken into the desert."

Fargo muttered an oath. "You bucking the law, mister?"

"Not the law," Reese said evenly. "But I'll buck any law officer who steps out of bounds. You're wearing a badge, Fargo, but that doesn't give you the right to kick over the traces. Any citizen has the privilege of demanding that a lawman make legal arrests." He paused, saw sudden uneasiness in Fargo. "You have a warrant for Morales?"

"Warrant? Who needs a warrant?"

"You do, Fargo."

"All the warrant I need is right here in my hand," Fargo said, but it was an empty sort of bluster. "I've got orders to take this hombre to Valido, and I'm doing it."

"This train stops at Valido."

"So what?"

"So you could have met it there—with a warrant—and made it a legal arrest," Reese stated. "You're not taking Morales out into the desert, Fargo. I've a hunch that if you did, he'd never see Valido—or any other town—again. Maybe you've got a law badge now, but you're still a wanted outlaw back in Texas."

Fargo growled an oath, swung his gun toward Reese. Morales moved swiftly, grabbing Fargo's wrist and forcing the gun down. The shot intended for the CPA man blasted into the floor. Fargo swore savagely, struggling with the Mexican. The Kid clubbed down with his gun, but the barrel merely grazed Morales' shoulder. Reese jumped the Kid then, and wrenched the gun from the young tough's fist. The Kid started an unholy yelling.

Reese gave him a violent shove that spilled him down between two seats on the opposite side of the aisle. The CPA man tossed the captured gun out a window and, all in one smooth motion, drew one of his .38's to cover the swarthy man who, tardily, was drawing his gun.

"Get him, Blackie!" Fargo yelled. "Get him off me!"

Blackie looked at Morales, who was slowly wrestling the burly Fargo to the floor, then at Reese. The swarthy man was gripped by indecision, then by fear. He let his weapon drop back into his holster. He grinned wryly.

"I'm out of it," he said.

MORALES drove a knee into Fargo's stomach, and the breath puffed explosively from the deputy who went limp on the floor, as the Mexican twisted the gun from his hand. Holding the big .45, Morales stepped back and stood beside Reese. He was not so natty now, but he was smiling.

"So," he said mockingly. "It was like I said, a mistake. I give everyone my word of honor—I, Juan de Baca y Morales, never was a rustler or a smuggler."

The Kid picked himself up, muttering oaths.

Jake Fargo rose, stared with hate-filled eyes—not at Morales but at Steve Reese.

"This ain't the last of it," he said thickly.

The train gave a sudden lurch, getting underway again, and the three hard-cases ran to drop off before it gathered speed.

Morales tossed Fargo's gun from a window once the water tank was left behind. He dusted and rearranged his mussed clothes, then sat down opposite Steve Reese. *"Muchisimas gracias, senor,"* he said gravely.

The CPA man smiled. *"Por nada,"* he replied, in the polite Mexican fashion. "It is nothing." Then he sobered. "It was a frame-up?"

Morales nodded. "I think so now, but at first I didn't know what to make of it. I thought a mistake was being made." He glanced about, made sure that none of the other passengers was close enough to overhear. Then he added, low-voiced, "A rurale has no official status north of the Border, of course. But I am here on orders. I speak in confidence, *amigo?"*

Reese assured him that he was.

"There is trouble brewing in Sonora," Morales said. "A revolution. A countryman of mine, a General Ramirez who now calls himself *El Zurriago*—the Whip—is plotting to seize the government of the State of Sonora. He has the backing of some Americans who are furnishing his faction with arms. Their headquarters are in Valido. I have orders to go to Valido and learn what I can about *El Zurriago's* backers." He smiled wryly. "It seems that I am a poor spy. My mission is known—and I am in danger. But for you, *amigo,* I would now be dead in the desert."

"You still plan to visit Valido?"

"Si. I have a friend there. I will get in touch with him."

"You'd better get your gun out of your valise before you reach Valido," Reese told him.

Morales nodded. "And what about you, *amigo?"* he asked earnestly. "Valido will be no more safe for you than for me. I saw the way Senor Fargo looked at you before he left

the train. He bears you a grudge, and he is a bad hombre."

"I'll watch myself," Steve Reese assured him. . . .

Another hour and the conductor came through bawling:

"Valido! Valido!"

Steve Reese got his gray Stetson and his old brown corduroy coat down from the luggage rack, and donned them. He lifted down his saddle. It had a Winchester rifle in the boot, a lariat on the horn, a bedroll tied behind the cantle.

He shouldered the rig, started toward the coach platform. Morales followed him, carrying his valise. The Mexican had his gun-belt buckled on under his coat.

The train stopped beside a small station painted a muddy yellow, like the water tank out on the desert. Reese and Morales descended to the platform, the immediate target for the eyes of a half-dozen men loafing about the station.

Valido's main street extended north from the tracks, and the town, a cow and mining center, was a sizable one. It had a bustling look. So many people were scattered about the business section that Steve Reese wondered how so many men could be idle in the middle of the morning.

The saloons seemed to be doing a thriving trade. Saddle horses were standing at hitch-racks. There were also quite a few rigs, several of them big freight wagons.

Valido's older houses and buildings were of adobe, the newer ones of unpainted plank. There were Mexicans about the 'dobes, and one *vaquero* approached Juan Morales.

Morales shook hands with Reese, saying, "It is not likely that we will meet again, my friend, so I will say *adios* and wish you luck."

THEY parted, Morales going with the *vaquero* and Reese looking about casually for his partners. The CPA man saw nothing of Dusty Trail and Hank Ball, however, and decided that they must have good reason for not meeting him. He knew they would get in touch with him in due time, so he angled across the dusty street toward a livery stable.

The hostler was a whiskery oldtimer who said, in reply to Reese's query, that a horse could be hired there. Reese followed him into the cool dimness of the barn, and after he had looked the various animals over, shortly he was cinching his saddle onto a fair-looking gray. The horse saddled, Reese questioned the hostler about the Crescent Ranch.

"Reckon you mean Matt Tolliver's Quarter-Moon," the old fellow said. "Don't know no Crescent hereabouts . . . Well, sir, you cross the railroad tracks and follow the southeast road. After maybe a mile you'll come to a fork in the road. You take the east branch, and it'll lead you to Quarter-Moon headquarters. Be sure you take the east branch, because the west one will lead you plumb into trouble—if you're a friend of the Wild Tollivers at the Quarter-Moon."

"Trouble? How so?"

"The west branch would take you to S A Ranch. Sam Ames' spread."

"Why would I get into trouble at the S A?"

The hostler chuckled. "I can see you're a teetotal stranger around here," he said. "The whole Border country knows that Sam Ames and the Wild Tollivers are feuding."

"Feuding?" Reese repeated. "You mean that—"

"I mean, stranger, that Matt Tolliver and Sam Ames hate each other's insides. And it don't pay for a friend of the Tollivers to stray onto Ames range." He chuckled again. "Except maybe he'd get paid off in lead."

Reese frowned. This was bad news, though the cattle country everywhere had its feuds, some of them harmless and some of them bloody. He had been drawn into several of the worst, and the experience hadn't been pleasant. He had once seen a range war develop out of a senseless feud. Reese wondered if the Tolliver-Ames feud might enter into the case he had come to investigate.

He mounted the gray, then asked:

"How come you call them the Wild Tollivers?"

"Because," said the hostler, "they're just that—wild. Wild as they come." He gave Reese an anxious look. "If you ain't a friend of theirs, stranger, you'd better think twice before you ride out to the Quarter-Moon. That's some friendly advice."

Reese nodded. "Thanks," he said, and

rode from the barn.

Once away from town, he lifted the gray to an easy lope.

From the fork in the road the hostler had mentioned Steve Reese saw a range of low hills several miles distant, and they appeared to be a solid wall of bald rock. He took the east branch, and it took him toward the rocky uplifts. The gray was a better mount than most livery horses. It had a lot of bottom and with Reese alternating between a lope and a fast walk, the animal covered the miles in a hurry.

Approaching the hills, the CPA field chief saw that they formed a torturous barrier. But the road led toward a narrow pass in the high cliffs.

It was wide enough for a wagon and team to enter, but with little room to spare. At the approach to the pass a crooked post had been set into the ground. Atop the post rested a skull, and in the brow of this grisly object was a hole that certainly had been made by a bullet. Nailed to the post, below the skull, was a board into which had been burned the blunt notice:

QUARTER MOON RANCH
NO TRESPASSING! ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK!

CHAPTER III

Lady Outpost

REESE frowned at the sign post. The Tollivers, he thought, might be wild, but they were also downright mean. Or maybe they possessed a macabre sense of humor. The notice wasn't merely a decent warning. It was a threat.

The cut in the rock hills widened gradually and, after perhaps a hundred yards, the CPA man rode onto one of those fine-valley ranges along the border country. He saw scattered bunches of cattle in the crescent or quarter-moon brand, and after perhaps a mile he topped a grassy swell and saw the ranch headquarters.

DUSTY TRAIL

The buildings were of adobe, located in a broad hollow through which ran a small clear water stream fringed by cottonwood trees. A huge willow grew before the ranchhouse, shading its front. Reese reined in to look at the place, and was startled when a voice behind him growled:

"Now that you're here, hombre, what do you want?"

Reese glanced over his shoulder.

He had ridden past a cluster of huge boulders, hardly mindful of them. A man stood by one of the big rocks, a rifle in the crook of his arm. He was a lanky giant of a man. He stood well over six feet, but his frame was gaunt. His bony face was young, and homely. His hat was pushed back on his head, and a shock of red hair hung straggly over his brow. He stared at Reese with china-blue eyes as unblinking as the twin muzzles of a shotgun.

Reese had good nerves, but he felt a sudden knotted tightness in the pit of his stomach. One glance at the man was enough to convince him that here was a tough hand who would shoot to kill on the slightest prov-

ocation. Reese lifted his empty right hand shoulder high.

"I'm here to see Matt Tolliver," he said. "On business."

"Yeah?" came the skeptical reply. "What kind of business?"

"About a stolen cow."

"Oh?"

"I'm from the CPA."

"A range detective," the man growled. "The devil himself hates a snooper. All right, hombre. Ride in. But if you ain't what you claim, it'll be too bad—for you."

Reese rode on, holding his horse to a walk, and the lanky man followed him. Crossing the ranchyard, the CPA man saw a fellow who stood in the shade of the bunkhouse, and he, too, had a rifle. He had watched Reese riding in across Quarter-Moon range. And, Reese saw with surprise, he looked much like the first man. The only difference in their appearance seemed to be the red mustache worn by the man over by the barn.

"Who's this jasper, Jess?" the man with the mustache asked.

"Claims he's from the CPA, Luke."

"Yeah?"

"He wants to see the old man about that stole bull."

The door to the ranchhouse opened, and the man who came striding across the yard must have sired Jess and Luke. He too was tall and gaunt, a man of about sixty. He had a bushy rust-red beard shot with gray. His face was craggy, weathered to the dark brown of old leather, and he wore what seemed to be a habitual scowl. Steve Reese took it for granted that he had met the Wild Tollivers, and that this was Matt Tolliver himself. The older man stamped the ground with every step he took, a prideful old rannihan. Like his sons, he had bright blue eyes, and they were staring at Steve Reese with suspicion. The old man's voice had a booming quality.

"You!" he demanded. "What do you want?"

Reese folded his hands on his saddle-horn. Trying to hide his annoyance he said civilly:

"My name is Steve Reese, Mr. Tolliver. I'm from the CPA. I was sent out from Austin to investigate the theft of a cow which was reported to CPA headquarters."

"Time you showed up," Matt Tolliver growled. "That cow happens to be a bull, mister. A bull worth five thousand dollars. It was stolen out of a fenced meadow, and by the eternal, I want it returned."

"It's worth five thousand dollars?"

"I'm telling you."

"What kind of a bull is it?"

"Not a kind you ever heard of, most likely," said Matt Tolliver. "It's a Brahma bull, imported from India. Some fool imported a half dozen of the critters, and the bankers who own Quarter-Moon bought one of 'em and had it shipped out here. They wanted it for breeding, to improve the Quarter-Moon herd. Nonsense. A crazy hump-backed critter. Five thousand dollars it cost 'em. More money than brains, that Chicago crowd."

REESE understood why Quarter-Moon's owners were concerned about the loss of the bull.

"When was the bull stolen, sir?" he asked.

"Two weeks ago, one dark night."

"You have any idea who the thief might be?"

A shrewd look came into Matt Tolliver's eyes. "I've got a blamed good idea," he stated. "I can name the thief. He's Quarter-Moon's nearest neighbor, a no-good son named Sam Ames."

Steve Reese didn't miss the slyness in the old man's eyes. He glanced at the Tolliver brothers, and saw them grinning with a secret amusement. There was something wrong here.

"If you know Ames stole the bull, how come you haven't recovered it?" he asked. "You look to me like men who'd handle your own trouble."

"Us Tollivers are peaceable folks," the old man said glibly. "If we rode over to S A range to get that bull, there'd be shooting. Sam Ames bosses a tough crew, and they'd shoot a Tolliver on sight. We held onto our tempers, so there wouldn't be bloodshed. We like to live and let live. And we do things legal-like. That's why we wanted the CPA to get back that Brahma for us."

Matt Tolliver's self-righteous pose seemed as false as a counterfeit coin. But he was a

member of the CPA, and it was not Steve Reese's place to call the man a liar.

"I'll have a talk with Sam Ames," he said. "How do I get to his place?"

"My boys'll show you the way."

"Well, thanks."

"You'll arrest that cow thief?"

Reese studied Matt Tolliver, wondering at the eagerness behind his question.

"If I find out that he stole your bull," he said, "I'll see that he's placed under arrest." He saw the quick look of satisfaction in the old rannihan's eyes.

The Tolliver boys rode with Reese. He wouldn't have called them boys. They were grown men, rawhide-tough men. Jess was about twenty-five, and the mustached Luke two or three years older. They flanked him, still grinning in that sly fashion. Reese wondered what the joke was. He was puzzled by the Tollivers, and mystified by the theft of the Brahma bull. It seemed to the CPA man that no man in his right mind would steal so distinctive a critter. He was also considering another angle. Sam Ames of the S A Ranch was also a CPA member.

Traveling across Quarter-Moon range, they entered some low timbered hills. The Tollivers followed a narrow passage through this higher country without climbing any difficult slopes. They came finally to a small creek, and reined in.

"Keep going straight ahead," Luke said, "and you'll come to S A range."

"And watch yourself," Jess added. "That S A outfit ain't friendly like the Quarter-Moon. S A riders shoot first and ask questions afterwards. They're downright hostile."

"Thanks for the warning," Reese said dryly.

He didn't look back, but he felt that the Tolliver boys were sitting their horses and looking after him. And grinning.

Another half hour and Steve Reese rode down a brushy slope onto a range much like the Quarter-Moon. He realized that the two outfits, Quarter-Moon and S A, shared one broad valley that probably ran down across the Border into Mexico. The low hills separated the two ranges, forming a barrier between the two feuding factions. Here again were grazing cattle, and dimly seen in the distance was S A headquarters. Far to the west were mountains that formed the western rim of the valley.

Reese rode warily. He saw no riders, so when the shot crashed against the stillness he was startled. The slug shrieked close by his head.

He jerked his rifle from its boot, dropped from the gray, dived behind a small boulder. Another shot sounded, and the slug thudded against the boulder. A bushwack gun could put fear in any man, and uneasiness gripped Reese. He couldn't see the gunman. Besides, he hadn't come to S A range to engage in a gunfight. After a third shot, a voice called:

"You, mister! Leave your guns behind, and come out with your hands up!"

Reese was jolted. It was a woman's voice.

THE field chief obeyed with relief. He left his rifle and his twin Colts behind the boulder, rose and held his hands at shoulder level. He walked slowly forward, and the woman—a girl of about twenty— came from a deep arroyo. She carried a rifle, held it expertly, covering the CPA man.

"That's far enough!" she said sharply.

She was in dead earnest, and Steve Reese had never seen a pretty girl manage to look so grim. She was striking. Dark blonde hair, clear gray eyes, nicely molded features. She wore range clothes—gray shirt, faded levis, worn boots. A gray Stetson hung at her shoulders by its chin-strap. Her skin was a smooth golden brown from much exposure to the hot Arizona sun. Reese realized that she was lovely. But the angry harshness of her voice spoiled the picture.

"You're a Quarter-Moon rider," she said. It was a blunt accusation.

Reese denied it. "No, ma'am. I—"

"I saw you ride down from the Barrera Hills!"

"Sure. But that doesn't make me a Quarter-Moon rider."

"It makes me mighty suspicious," the girl said curtly. "You couldn't have come from any place but Quarter-Moon, and nobody but Quarter-Moon hard-cases ride that range. And Border toughs!"

"If you'll just give me a chance to explain, ma'am—"

"I'm giving you a chance."

Reese could have denied that, too. But she didn't give him a chance to get a word in edgewise. She had opened her mouth to tongue-lash him some more when he said hastily:

"I'm Steve Reese of the CPA. I'm here to investigate a bull that Matt Tolliver claims was stolen off Quarter-Moon range. Now—"

"The Cattlemen's Protective Agency?"

"Yes, ma'am. My credentials are in my coat pocket."

"Get them out, mister," the girl said.

Reese reached into his corduroy coat, brought out the envelope with his papers. He took a forward step, but the girl commanded:

"Stay where you are!"

She ordered him to lay the envelope on the ground and move five steps away then picked up the envelope and examined its contents. When she spoke again, her voice had lost some of its harshness.

"All right," she told him. "These papers seem to prove you're what you claim to be."

CHAPTER IV

Bull in the Brush

THE girl returned Reese's envelope, but not his smile.

"What's this about that ornery Matt Tolliver claiming a bull was stolen off Quarter-Moon?" she demanded to know.

"It's a valuable Brahma bull," he told her.

"A *what?*"

"A Brahma," Reese said. "A breed of cattle native to India." He saw the girl eying him skeptically. "Matt says only a half-dozen Brahma bulls have been brought to this country, and the Quarter-Moon's owners bought one. He claims it was stolen about two weeks ago."

The girl was thoughtful. "I did hear in Valido not long ago that the Quarter-Moon had come by a queer breed." Then he gave a start. "Look here! Is that old devil claiming that my father stole his what-you-may-call-it bull?"

"He seems a little suspicious of Sam Ames," Reese replied. "Is Sam your father?"

"He is."

"What's he call you?"

"Sherry Ames is my name," she said, and she was losing her temper again. "Mr. Reese, Sam Ames is no rustler! We've got no Quarter-Moon stock on S A range. "I—" She broke off abruptly, a shocked look on her face. "What—does a Brahma bull look like?"

Reese shrugged. "I've never seen one, but I've seen pictures of them in stock journals. The breed is heavy, with medium-sized horns. Has a hump, something like a buffalo's. It's tawny, I think. Sort of buckskin. Why?"

Sherry Ames looked badly shaken. "No reason," she said, but she was too honest to be a good liar. "It's just that . . . Well, a Mexican kid who works for us told me he saw a queer cow a couple days ago. He said it was a hump-backed bull. A *jorobo,* he called it. I thought he had imagined it."

"Where did the kid see it?"

"Not—not around here," she said falteringly. Then she bit her lower lip and a flush stained her cheeks. "All right, darn it! It was up in the *espesura.* But don't get the idea that he really saw such a bull. I tell you he just imagined it!"

The Spanish word *espesura,* of course, meant thicket. And since Sherry had said "up" she probably meant to the north. He walked over, picked up his guns, and mounted.

"Where do you think you're going?" the girl cried.

"To the *espesura,*" he said, and turned his horse north.

He had an uneasy feeling as he lifted the gray to a lope. His back felt as broad as a barn door. But he hoped Sherry Ames was more level-headed than her talk indicated, that she wouldn't take a shot at him. He glanced back. She was running toward the arroyo.

He heard a pounding of hoofs and looked back again. She was coming after him on a pinto pony she'd had hidden in the arroyo.

She rode as expertly as any cowhand. Reese had to admire her. It was not difficult to admire a girl with as much spirit as Sherry Ames.

She swung alongside him, held the pinto to the gray's easy lope. Her rifle was in its saddle boot now, but she hadn't put aside her hostility.

"Listen, Reese, you're trespassing," she said breathlessly. "You've got no right to ride S A range. I'm warning you—"

HANK BALL

He grinned at her. "Save your breath, Sherry."

"You—"

"Yes, I'm pretty determined."

"I should have shot you on sight!"

"You tried hard enough."

"I fired warning shots!" Sherry said furiously. "Don't think I can't hit what I aim at!"

The thicket was beyond a rocky rise and extended onto the range of rock hills that formed the north rim of the valley. It was a dense stretch of mesquite, and from a distance appeared impenetrable. But as Reese rode close, he saw openings wide enough for a horseman to pass through.

He rode in, the girl following him. There were occasional bare patches within the tangled growth. The approach of riders scared out a cow with a new calf, then a wild-eyed steer. Deep in the *espesura,* they came suddenly upon a parklike clearing where a spring-fed stream wound through a grassy meadow. In this clearing were several cows wearing the S A brand.

And the Brahma bull.

REESE heard Sherry Ames' startled exclamation. So she hadn't know for sure that the Brahma was in the thicket. She had been hoping the Mexican boy had been mistaken. As he reached for his catch-rope, he saw the stricken look on her face.

"No!" she said, half under her breath. "No, it can't be!"

The Brahma was big and heavy compared to the familiar range stock of the southwest, but evidently was a docile animal. The cows scattered at the rider's approach, but the bull gave him a curious look out of gentle bovine eyes, then went back to grazing.

Reese shook out his loop, made his throw, and the gray, a trained cow pony, swerved to pull the rope taut. The Brahma made no attempt to fight the lariat. It was willing to be led. Reese led it across the clearing, watching the animal over his shoulder. He could well imagine that good heifers bred to such a bull would certainly produce a fine new strain of beef cattle.

Still, seeing Sherry's face, Reese was almost sorry that he had found the Brahma. At least on S A range. It was a blow for her. But she was recovering from the shock.

"My father knows nothing about this," she said defiantly. "If Pablo told him about the bull, he paid no attention." She repeated firmly, "Sam Ames is no rustler!"

"I'm sorry, but—"

Reese broke off, listened intently. Riders were coming into the *espesura,* coming fast.

There were two of them, a gray-mustached oldster and a Mexican boy of about fourteen. They rode recklesly through the mesquite,

ignoring the jaggy branches that tore their shirts and scratched their skin. The man had a long-barreled Colt in his hand, and the boy carried an old Springfield rifle across the saddle.

"Sherry!" the man called thickly. "Thank God, we got here in time!"

He reined in his blowing mount, leveled his gun at Reese.

"You!" he bellowed. "What do you mean, dragging my daughter into the brush?"

The Mexican boy also lifted his weapon, and for one moment Reese was sure they meant to shoot him out of the saddle.

"Dad, wait!" Sherry cried.

"Pablo saw this hombre ride over from Quarter-Moon and head this way with you, Sherry," Sam Ames said. "He came after me and—" He broke off abruptly, noticing the Brahma bull at the end of Steve Reese's rope. "What's all this?" he demanded.

"Dad, this is Steve Reese. He's from the CPA."

"Yeah? What's he doing with that Quarter-Moon critter?"

"Let me explain, Mr. Ames," Reese broke in. "I was sent here to investigate the theft of this Brahma bull from Quarter-Moon range. Matt Tolliver claimed you had stolen it. I came here and found the bull, here in the brush."

No doubt Sam Ames was a decent sort ordinarily, but now, after his alarm for his daughter's safety, he lost his temper and swore bitterly at Matt Tolliver and all his relatives.

"Calls me a cow thief, does he?" he shouted. "Why, cuss it, I'll horsewhip him until he begs for mercy! Reese, Matt Tolliver hazed that bull over here just to make trouble for me!"

"What would that get him?"

"It'd give him a lot of satisfaction to see me sent to Yuma Prison," the old rancher said biterly. "Him and me used to be pardners. We owned this spread and another down in Sonora, together. But Matt Tolliver, he's got a weakness for cards, like some men have for whisky. The higher the stakes, the better he likes a game. In another six months, he would have bankrupted us, so I forced a showdown. I borrowed enough money to buy him out—and I kicked him out. That was ten years ago, and he's hated me ever since! And he's caused me plenty of trouble."

"That's true, Mr. Reese," Sherry said. "Matt Tolliver has made things unpleasant for S A ever since Dad ended the partnership. And the past few months, he's been worse than ever."

Quickly she told how an S A herd being trailed to the railroad for shipment to market had been stampeded one dark night by the Tollivers, wtih a loss of fifty-eight steers. An S A line cabin down on the Border had been burned and the arsonist had left an empty coal-oil can behind. There had been other such incidents.

"And now this," Sherry said.

STEVE REESE had met the Tollivers, and now he knew the Ameses. In his long career, both as a CPA field chief and as a St. Louis police lieutenant, he had learned to judge character. He believed that Sam Ames was as truthful as Matt Tolliver was untruthful. But any investigator must close a case on evidence, not on his appraisal of the character of the parties involved.

The evidence was damning against Sam Ames. The Brahma bull had been found on his range—hidden on his range. In the cattle country, such evidence branded a man a rustler.

Sam Ames holstered his gun.

"I'm a member of the CPA myself, Reese," he said reasonably. "I know how things look to you, and that you've got to do your duty. But I'm asking you to go slow. It's important for me to settle this crazy business in a hurry, because there's trouble brewing down in Sonora—political trouble, maybe a revolution—and I've got to take my crew down there to my Mexican ranch to gather up my herd of Mexican cattle and trail them up here to the S A. I can't afford to be thrown into jail on a rustling charge."

Reese thought it over. Colonel Beauvine would expect him to look out for Ames's interests, as well as Quarter-Moon's since the old rancher was a CPA member.

"I can't promise anything until I know

what you want, sir," he said.

Ames chewed on his straggly mustache. "I want to settle this pronto," he said presently. "Matt Tolliver will insist I be held for trial. I'll go to Valido with you, Reese, and have a talk with Sheriff Harriman. I'll post bond to assure my presence in court, if you and the sheriff will agree to let me go to Mexico after my cattle."

Reese nodded. "I'm willing to take a chance on your word." He smiled wryly. "You could have your own way, anyhow. You could get a lawyer to bail you out, and I don't think the sheriff or I would stay with you every minute to see that you don't jump bail and head for Mexico. Shall we start for Valido now?"

Ames nodded. He glanced at his daughter.

"Sherry, you tell Buck Hogan that he's to ramrod the crew until I get back," he said. Then to the Mexican boy: "Pablo, you keep watch and tell Buck if any Quarter-Moon riders come sneaking onto S A range."

They rode from the mesquite thicket, Reese leading the Brahma bull. Sherry and Pablo headed south across S A range. The CPA man and Sam Ames took the road that led out of the valley and on to Valido.

It was slow going with the bull in tow, and the sun was now low.

For a time they rode in silence, then Sam Ames said:

"I never knew a man as wolf-mean as Matt Tolliver, Reese. How he ever got to boss the Quarter-Moon, I'll never know. He's a good cowman, but he sure throws a crooked shadow. And his two older sons are just like him."

"I met Jess and Luke," Reese said. "A tough trio, Matt and those sons of his . . . There's another son?"

"Yeah. Dan."

"He's different from the others?"

"You'd never know he was the same flesh-and-blood," Ames said, with feeling. "You only have to know Dan to like him. He left the Quarter-Moon a half dozen times to work other places, because he couldn't stomach Tolliver ways. They'd let him go for a while, then Matt would send Jess and Luke to fetch him back. The blow-up came when Dan started courting Sherry."

CHAPTER V

Son Against Father

WITH a nod of understanding, Steve Reese smiled wryly. It seemed that each time he met an attractive girl, some other man was about to put her in double harness, although he had long since made up his mind that that could never be for him—not while he lived the dangerous life he did. Nevertheless he secretly envied Dan Tolliver. At the same time, he was sure that Dan must be a decent sort for a girl like Sherry to be interested in him.

"Like I said," Sam Ames went on, "Dan is all right. If Sherry decides to marry him, I'll give 'em my blessin'. But Matt Tolliver's not built that way. He warned Dan to stay away from Sherry. Dan reminded the old rannihan that he was past twenty-one and his own boss. Matt sicked Jess and Luke onto Dan. Dan whipped the pair of 'em. He saddled his horse, told Matt that he was done with him for good. Matt disowned him, then and there. That was a couple weeks ago. We haven't seen much of Dan since. But he was plenty worried about something the last time he came to see Sherry."

"You think it's because of Dan that Matt is trying to send you to prison as a rustler?" Reese asked.

"It could be." Sam Ames frowned in thought. "Tell you the truth, I don't know what to make of it. Matt Tolliver is a tricky son, and he may be out to get me for more reason than to work off an old grudge."

Steve Reese nodded. He had a suspicion that Matt Tolliver might want Ames in prison for some other reason that wasn't yet clear.

It was long after dark when they reached town. But Valido was more lively by night than by day. The business section was crowded. All the stores and shops were open, and naturally the saloons, gambling places, and honkatonks.

Reese talked to the old hostler at the livery stable from which he had hired his gray mount, and put the Brahma bull into an empty corral around back for safekeeping. He also left his horse, then set off to the sheriff's office with Sam Ames.

The were passing a saloon when the CPA chief became aware of a man watching them from the shadows. Reese was not sure, but he thought the man looked much like the "deputy sheriff," Jake Fargo, he had encountered on the train.

The sheriff's office was in the courthouse, a two-storied stone building beyond the business section. The lawman was dozing in his chair with his boots on his littered rolltop desk. Sheriff Milt Harriman was an old man, at least ten years older than Sam Ames. He looked too old to be a peace officer in a town like Valido.

His face was deep-lined, leathery dark, and his eyes were a faded blue. Like Ames, he had a shaggy mustache. It was snow-white. He shook hands with Ames, then with Reese whom Ames introduced.

"What's on your minds, men?" he asked. "Range trouble?"

Reese let Sam Ames explain. Sheriff Harrman showed only a mild interest.

"Shucks, Sam," he said. "There's no need for you to get worked up about a little thing like this. "I've known you for thirty years—Matt Tolliver too. You wouldn't steal anybody's bull. As for Matt . . . Well, he's a mean cuss. Let a calf of his stray from its mother, and he yells 'rustler.' Where's this bull now?"

"At Mowbrey's livery stable."

"Well, we'll turn it over to Matt when he shows up."

"He'll want me held on a rustling charge, Milt."

Harriman grinned. "Maybe I can talk him out of it. If I can't, you can stand trial and let him try to prove you stole that bull. He didn't see you steal it, did he? He ain't got witnesses, has he? Shucks, all you'll have to do is argue that the bull strayed over onto your range." He looked at Steve Reese. "What do you say?"

It was only a matter of a single bull, but still it was more serious than Sheriff Harriman could be made to realize. The CPA man was more and more convinced that Matt Tolliver was framing Ames for some as yet undisclosed reason.

Reese said, after a moment's thought, "Both Tolliver and Ames are Association members, Sheriff. I've got to protect the interests of each. If Tolliver prefers charges against Ames, I'll have to appear at the trial, testify that I found the Brahma bull on S A range. I hope you'll be able to talk Tolliver out of the idea of having Ames arrested, however." He turned to the rancher. "I'll stay in Valido until the matter is settled one way or another. Right now, I'm going to find some supper."

Ames nodded. "I'm obliged to you," he said, and turned back to talk to the sheriff.

REESE saw nothing of his two CPA aides, Dusty Trail and Hank Ball, as he walked back along Valido's main street. He decided to look for them after he had eaten. He had started across the street toward a hash-house when a bunch of riders—seven of them—came loping into town. Reese saw Matt Tolliver and his two elder sons among them.

He walked over as they halted, and the bearded Quarter-Moon foreman remained in saddle when he saw Reese. The others dismounted and headed for a saloon.

"You find that Brahma bull, Reese?" Tolliver demanded.

"I found it."

"Where?"

"I guess you know where, Mr. Tolliver."

The gaunt oldster stared down at him with a dark scowl. Then he grinned.

"On S A range, eh?" he said. "Well, I figured Sam Ames had stole it.. I'm going to jail him for that. Nothing I hate more'n a cow thief. Where's that bull now?"

Reese told him where it was. The suspicions he'd had of this man were stronger than ever now. But he could make no accusation. Suspicion wasn't enough.

Reese frowned. "I've talked to Sam Ames," he said. "He doesn't strike me as a man who would stoop to stealing cattle."

Tolliver's grin faded. His scowl returned. "You sayin' I hid that bull on S A range

to frame Ames?" he demanded.

"You're quick to think that, Tolliver."

"Listen, hombre—"

"See the sheriff, Tolliver," Reese broke in. "Ames is with him now, and Harriman wants to talk to you. If this affair is merely a part of a feud between you and Ames, I'd advise you to drop it. You've got your bull back, and it will gain you nothing to charge a man like Sam Ames with rustling."

"Why, you—"

Reese didn't wait to hear the angry outburst. He was already on his way to the restaurant.

It was well past the supper hour, and there were only three customers in the place. Reese took a stool at the counter, ordered a steak and potatoes, coffee and pie. He was half through the meal when a gunshot roared above the town's other noises.

His first thought was that Sam Ames and Matt Tlloiver had clashed—and maybe one had fallen under the other's gun. He had started to get down from his stool when the fat counterman said:

"Don't let that spoil your appetite, hombre. That happens all the time in this town. Anyway, since all these tough hands have drifted in on the hope that they can hire their guns in that revolution that's about to pop south of the Border."

Reese said, "Oh," and sat down again.

The fat man gave him an anxious look. "Nothing personal," he added hastily. "I'm not meanin' you're one of those longhaired warriors."

The CPA man smiled, and commented that he wanted no part of a revolution in Mexico or anywhere else. He finished his meal at his leisure, paid his bill, then rolled and lighted a cigarette.

The door burst open, slammed back and hit the wall with a crash, and Matt Tolliver tore into the place.

The old rannihan looked plenty wild now. His beard seemed to bristle. His faded blue eyes glittered.

"You, Reese!" he yelled. "Why didn't you get the sheriff to lock up that sneaky Sam Ames? He just put a forty-five slug through the head of the Quarter-Moon's Brahma bull!"

"What? You're sure?"

"Who else would do a dirty trick like that?" Tolliver raged. "We saw him riding toward the livery barn, then heard the shot. I'm telling you—"

Reese didn't wait. Brushing past Tolliver, he rushed from the hash-house, heading for the corral. Matt Tolliver came after him, muttering angrily.

Perhaps gunshots were no novelty in Valido, but a lot of people were hurrying in the same direction.

"Somebody killed a bull worth five thousand dollars!" Reese heard a man shout. "Yeah, five thousand!"

In such a town few men could be considered worth as much as that Brahma bull.

A crowd had already gathered at the corral, some of the men held lanterns that cast a hazy glow over the scene. Steve Reese glanced into the corral, just to make sure that the bull was dead, then pushed through the crowd to where Sam Ames was boxed in by the two lanky Tolliver boys and the four Quarter-Moon hands who had come to town with them.

[Turn page]

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AMES looked dazed. He had lost his hat, and his gun had been taken from him. His right eye was swollen, and blood was trickling from a cut on his lower lip.

"It's a lie—a danged lie!" he was muttering.

Luke Tolliver aimed a blow at the old man's face, but Reese grabbed his arm and shoved him aside. Luke swore.

"Now, look here, Reese," he growled. "This hombre—"

Reese ignored him. "Sam." he demanded of Ames, "did you kill that bull?"

"No, cuss it!" the rancher said thickly. "I was riding by when I heard the shot. It wasn't any of my business, I figured, so I kept on going. Then these Quarter-Moon riders came after me, took my gun, and brought me back."

Reese swung on the Tolliver crowd. "Where's his gun?"

Luke Tolliver handed it over.

"You can't prove anything by it," he said. "He punched out the fired shell and put in a fresh cartridge, before we caught up with him. The sheriff had no business letting him go. A rustler belongs in a cell! Killing a bull worth all that money! Why, he'd ought to be strung up!"

Reese no more believed Sam Ames had killed the bull than he believed the man had stolen it in the first place. This was just another part of a scheme to send Ames to prison. The Tollivers had taken this extreme step because Sheriff Harriman had failed to throw Ames into a cell. But it was something else the CPA could not prove. A sense of helplessness that was unusual with the field chief gripped him. But then aid came from an unexpected source. A tall, blond man pushed through the crowd.

"Sam is right!" he said bluntly. "He didn't kill that bull." He faced Luke Tolliver, his handsome face stern. "You can't get away with this, Luke. Brother or no brother, I'm telling the truth."

In spite of a certain immunity to surprises, Reese was startled. For he recognized this blond man instantly—Dan, the third son of old Matt Tolliver.

"Luke," Dan Tolliver said, "you shot that bull!"

CHAPTER VI

Town Boss

IT WAS plain to Reese that Dan Tolliver spoke with more sadness than anger, as though he regretted the need to make such an accusation against his brother. Luke looked jolted. And if any man's face ever showed guilt, Luke Tolliver's bony face did now.

"That's a lie, you no-good outcast!" Jess Tolliver yelled.

Such talk was fight talk, and the crowd backed away. Some fled well out of bullet range. The yellowish glow of a lantern hanging on a post of the high corral fence, brought out the faces of the angry men in sharp relief.

The handsome Dan faced his two homely brothers defiantly. Old Matt Tolliver stood behind Luke and Jess, scowling ferociously, and the toughlooking Quarter-Moon hands ranged behind Matt. Steve Reese stood between the battered and still dazed Sam Ames, and Dan Tolliver.

Seven against three!

The CPA man fully expected gun-play. He expected Luke to draw on Dan and Sam Ames, and had quickly decided to throw in with those two. Staring at the Tolliver crowd, his dark eyes narrowed, agleam with a dangerous look. His hands were resting lightly on his crossed cartridge belts, ready to grab for his .38 Colts instantly. But he was deeply regretting all this. He had no desire to see any of these men go down under blazing guns. Still it seemed inevitable. And the worst of it was that he did not as yet understand what sort of a grim game was being played.

Luke Tolliver's right hand closed on his holstered gun.

"You ain't a brother to me, hombre," he said to Dan flatly. "Not any more."

There was a hurt look in Dan's eyes. He lifted a hand to his shirt pocket, pulled out

a tobacco sack and a folder of papers.

"Blood's thicker than water, Luke," he said bleakly. "I'm not going to try and beat you to the draw. I'm not grabbing. If you want to kill me, it'll have to be in cold blood."

He began to spill tobacco into a paper. He was icy calm, almost fatalistic in his attitude, and his hands showed not the slightest tremor.

Reese had to admire Dan Tolliver.

Luke cursed his brother, called him a liar and a coward—and more. He was wild with rage, trying to goad Dan into drawing. Dan got his cigarette made, put it between his lips. He felt in his shirt pocket, but found no match. He didn't lower his searching hand to his pants' pocket, knowing that might give Luke the excuse that he was reaching for his gun.

A man came forward from the crowd.

"A light, feller?" he asked.

Reese recognized the voice, and felt a quick relief. He glanced at the man—at Dusty Trail—who came forward puffing on one of his eternal stogies which almost could be considered his trademark. He dropped an eyelid at Reese, then held his stogie out so that Dan Tolliver could light his cigarette from it. This placed Dusty's bulky person between Dan and the vicious Luke.

Dusty had a rather foolish look on his fat face. It was as though he didn't know any better than to blunder into gun range at such a time. But Steve Reese knew that the stocky CPA man had acted deliberately, with due consideration.

Another man drifted forward from the crowd, a tall, good-looking redhead. Hank Ball.

"That cigarette is sure going to taste good," he drawled, "lighting it off a piece of burning rope."

Dusty gave him a scowl. "Rope!" he growled. "Listen, hombre! This here seegar of mine is a pure Havana. Cost me two-bits, over to Tucson." He put the big, black stogie back in his mouth, puffed furiously, blowing a cloud of smoke into Hank Ball's face. "How you like that?" he asked pugnaciously. "Smells like perfume, don't it?"

Hank Ball pretended to be taken with a severe coughing spell.

"I'm poisoned!" he gasped.

Somebody in the crowd laughed.

Others joined in, and suddenly this clowning had changed a danger-filled moment into a farce. The Tolliver crowd, Luke included, was rattled if not amused. The fat, cherubic-faced man with the stogie, and the coughing red-headed man seemed unaware of what they had interrupted. They kept on insulting each other, and Luke Tolliver now couldn't have got a shot at Dan if he had drawn his gun. Steve Reese's two aides had once again, as on many another occasion, proved their worth in a tight spot.

But now a bunch of riders was coming past the barn from the street, and the crowd made way for them. One was a girl—Sherry Ames.

FIVE men rode with the girl, and they looked as tough as the Wild Tollivers. Matt Tolliver swore, recognizing the S A riders, then muttered an order to his sons and hands. They backed off, drawing their guns. The five S A riders dropped their hands to their weapons, but a word from Sherry kept them from drawing. The danger of a gunfight was back again, and Steve Reese knew that no clowning by Dusty and Hank could stop it this time.

"I figured you might get into trouble, Dad," Sherry said, "so I brought some of the boys." She noticed his swollen eye and cut lip. "What happened?" she demanded in an anxious voice.

Sam Ames stooped and picked up his gun from where Reese had dropped it after getting it from Luke Tolliver. The old rancher looked more angry than dazed now.

"Daughter," he said flatly, "ride back to the street." When she started to protest, he raised his voice. "Do as I tell you, Sherry!"

She bit her lip, but turned her pinto away. If she had seen Dan Tolliver, she had given no sign of it. But Dan was staring after her. Dusty and Hank lined up to side Reese.

"We've got to have a talk," the fat CPA man whispered.

Reese nodded, said low-voiced: "I'll take a room at the hotel. Meet me there later."

Sam Ames was moving over to stand by his five riders, gun in hand. His face was so stiff with anger it looked like a mask.

"Matt, I've taken all I'm going to take off you!" he declared challengingly. "I'm not alone now. I'm backed by good men, and the odds are about even. I'm calling you, Matt Tolliver. This is showdown!"

The seven Quarter-Moon men were ranged abreast in a line, Matt in the center. He grinned humorlessly.

"Suit yourself, hombre," he said tauntingly. "You never was a gunfighter, and you sure ain't learned to be one at your age."

"Better think again, Tolliver," Reese said.

The old rannihan shot him an ugly look. "Keep out of this, Reese. This don't concern you or the CPA. Jess, throw down on that range detective!"

Jess Tolliver had only to lift his cocked gun to cover Reese.

"Move a finger, hombre," Jess warned, "and you're a goner."

A gun beside Reese blazed, and above the roar of it Jess Tolliver screamed. Jess dropped his gun, hugged his right arm to his lanky body. Blood stained his hand, as his knees buckled. He sank down on them, and stayed like that. Reese's .38s were in his fists, covering the rest of the Tolliver crowd.

"Thanks, Hank," he said, for it had been the redhead who had wounded Jess.

On his other side, Dusty Trail stood ready for trouble, no longer stupid-looking now that he had a gun in his hand. Beyond Dusty, stood Dan Tolliver, looking stunned. And the six men surrounding the kneeling, groaning Jess showed signs of indecision.

Every man in the Tolliver crowd was now aware that the odds were against his outfit.

"Hold it, boys—hold it!" Matt Tolliver muttered.

But Luke showed his wildness. Growling an oath, he yelled:

"Let 'em have it!"

"Sure!" Steve Reese shouted angrily. "Come on and get yourselves filled with lead!" He had lost his patience with the Wild Tollivers.

Two men came through the gradually retreating and swiftly shrinking crowd. One was old Sheriff Milt Harriman, carrying a double-barreled shotgun in the crook of his arm.

The other man would have stood out in any crowd, and his presence here immediately seemed to dominate the situation. He strode forward boldly, ignoring all those leveled guns. He was a man as tall as Steve Reese, much heavier of body, and his bulk appeared to be all hard-muscled brawn.

He was no Border town ruffian, however. The dark gray suit he wore seemed to be the work of an expert tailor. His shirt was of white silk, and with it he wore a maroon cravat. He carried a narrow-brimmed, pearl-gray Stetson in his left hand. His hair was thick and wavy, black except at the temples where it was dusted with gray. He was florid of face, coarsely handsome.

He glanced about, his dark gaze touching the wounded Jess Tolliver first, then every man who had a gun in his hand.

Beside Steve Reese, Hank Ball whispered: "Frank Stallman, Doc. Boss of Valido!"

STALLMAN was evidently one of those individuals born to lead, to handle other men, to sway crowds. His will dominated this crowd, and he knew it. He smiled, and said:

"All right, boys. Break it up. We can't have a battle here in Valido."

"It was like this, Mr. Stallman—" Matt Tolliver said.

"Never mind, Matt," Stallman broke in. "You know, and so does Sam Ames here, that Valido don't want you cattlemen coming to town to settle your feuds. Put up your guns, or Sheriff Harriman will throw you and Ames in jail."

Reese noted that not once did this big man bring himself into it by any spoken word. It was "we" and "the sheriff." Yet Stallman made it clear that he was the power behind the warning.

"Sheriff," he said, "maybe you'd better suggest that the S A crew ride out, to avoid further trouble."

Harriman nodded. "Sam," he said, "get your horse and take your hands home."

Stallman glanced at Jess Tolliver, whom

Luke was now helping to rise.

"Who shot this man?" he said sharply.

"I did," Hank Ball said, his voice a lazy drawl. "He was going to gun down this stranger"—Hank nodded in Reese's direction—"in cold blood."

Stallman shifted his gaze to Reese, and on his face now was a frown, replacing his casual smile.

"I've never seen you around Valido before," he said. And waited. When Reese didn't reply, Frank Stallman asked sharply: "You one of the S A crew?"

"No," said Reese. He was frankly annoyed by Stallman's brusqueness. He could admire a leader of men, but he had no liking for town bosses. "I'm not on Ames' side, nor Tolliver's."

Stallman was plainly curious about this tall, rather somber-appearing stranger. But he was not a man to admit his curiosity. He turned his back on the CPA field chief and spoke to Matt Tolliver.

"I want to see you at my office," he said. It was a blunt order.

"Sure, Mr. Stallman," Matt Tolliver said.

The trouble was over then, thanks to Valido's town boss. Or at least, Steve Reese reflected, it was postponed.

"We'll see you later, Doc," Hank Ball said softly, and he and Dusty moved away through the darkness. "Doc" was the name Reese's aides had long ago given him, because, as they said, he looked more like a professional man than a range detective.

The Ames bunch rode out, quickly disappearing. Dan Tolliver, too, took his departure, slipping away unnoticed by anyone but Reese, as Matt Tolliver followed Frank Stallman toward the street. Luke looked after Jess.

Reese followed Dan into the barn. Dan's face was bleak in the light of a lantern hanging from a post. He was a sensitive young fellow, Reese realized, who possessed none of the Tolliver toughness.

He looked around and gave the CPA field chief an annoyed look.

"I don't want to talk about this business, if that's what *you* want," he said curtly. Then quickly: "Sorry. But I'm all broken up because of this trouble."

CHAPTER VII

Outlaw Vengeance

MAKING himself a cigarette, Reese handed his "makings" to Dan Tolliver. He was silent until they had lighted their smokes. The last of the crowd had drifted back to the center of town. The hostler moved around somewhere inside the barn. Reese wanted badly to question the silent man beside him, but he was aware that Dan wouldn't reveal anything about the Wild Tollivers' schemings.

"It's like this," he said carefully, after telling Dan his name and business. "The CPA has both the Quarter-Moon and the S A for members. I was sent here to investigate the theft of that Brahma bull, but my chief would want me to do all I can to see there's no more trouble between the two outfits."

"I'll tell you one thing, Reese," Dan said abruptly.

"Yeah?"

"You can't reason with the Tollivers."

"If a man knew what they were up to he might give them a warning they'd heed."

Dan shook his head. "They'd laugh at a warning, and fight if threatened." He threw his cigarette to the ground, stamped upon it savagely. "I'd like to head them off myself, not because I hate them, but to keep them from ending up in real trouble. I don't know just why they're riding Sam Ames, unless it's out of pure meanness. But I do know that my father is mixed up in some scheme of Frank Stallman's, and Stallman is as crooked as—"

There was a furtive movement of a shadowy figure over by the darkened railroad station. Reese saw it out of the corner of his eye. Some instinct warned him of danger. He gave Dan a violent shove, and threw himself to one side.

And a gunshot roared.

Reese drew and fired twice before the gun

over by the station blasted again. When the gunman did fire, the powder-flash of his weapon showed that his shot went into the ground by his feet. He took two staggering steps, then sprawled and did not try to rise. Reese glanced at Dan Tolliver.

"You all right?"

"Yeah. The slug went between us."

"Fetch a lantern," Reese ordered, and started toward the fallen man.

He moved warily, gun ready, but the gunman still didn't move. He was beyond moving.

Yelling men came running, arriving as soon as Dan Tolliver got there with a lantern. Sheriff Milt Harriman couldn't have been far away, for he was among the first to arrive.

The sheriff rolled the dead man over, and Reese saw the heavy, ugly face of the man who had boarded the train at the desert water tank to arrest the Mexican rurale, Juan Morales. Jake Fargo, who had called himself a deputy sheriff.

"One of those gun-hands that have been drifting into town lately, I reckon," Harriman muttered. "What happened, Reese?"

Reese explained how Fargo had fired at him and Dan Tolliver without cause or warning. It was a relief to the CPA man to know that Fargo hadn't been deputized by Harriman. Reese felt in the dead man's shirt pocket, found the deputy sheriff badge Fargo had worn on the train, and showed it to Harriman.

"You know why he should be carrying this star?"

"Nope."

Reese turned the badge over to the sheriff. "Am I in any trouble because of this?"

"Not with the law," Harriman said. "But watch out for his friends."

Reese nodded, thinking of the two men who had boarded the train with Fargo. He didn't speak of his encounter with the trio to the sheriff.

Reese turned to the man who held the lantern. He was not Dan Tolliver, though, but a black-bearded miner.

And Reese could see Dan nowhere in the crowd. Dan Tolliver had slipped away.

Turning away, Reese could only figure that Jake Fargo had tried to kill him because of what had happened on the train. The man had looked at him with hate-filled eyes after the brawl, and warned him that it wouldn't end there. Probably Fargo had tried to work off a grudge.

Pushing through the crowd, Reese was off guard for a moment. Two burly men crowded against him, one to either side, and caught his arms with powerful hands. He couldn't have grabbed out his guns had he tried, and a low-voiced warning kept him from struggling.

"Keep still and keep quiet—or you'll get your arms broke!"

They walked him away from the crowd, before the same man spoke again.

"The boss wants to see you, hombre." Some of the pressure on Reese's arms eased. "Just take it easy. You're going, even if we have to tote you."

"All right," Reese said coolly. "But who's the boss?"

"You'll find out," he was told.

THEY walked him to a big frame building, a warehouse. There was enough light from the windows of a saloon opposite to permit the CPA man to see the sign over the doorway of the warehouse loading platform. He read:

ARIZONA-SONORA MINING EQUIPMENT COMPANY

Reese was taken up an open stairway at the side of the building. One of the men opened the door at the top of the stairs, and the three entered a room furnished as an office. The room was dimly lighted, but no one was there. Across the room was a closed door, and a rumble of voices came from behind it.

The door opened, and Reese saw into a brightly lighted room. Frank Stallman stood by the inner door, shaking hands with a half-dozen men as they left his private office. Three of them were men much like Stallman—well-groomed, expensively tailored, aggressive of manner, shrewd-looking. The banker type, or the business executive type.

Three others were Mexicans, and they

interested Steve Reese more. One was beefy man with piercing dark eyes and a heavy black mustache. He wore a black suit and gray Stetson but, despite his civilian attire, there was about him the unmistakable look of the professional soldier. As Stallman shook hands with this man, he said:

"I hope it's been a profitable evening for all of us, General."

The man called "General" merely grunted. He departed hurriedly, followed by his two countrymen who also looked like soldiers in mufti. As the door closed behind the group, Reese thought of what Juan Morales had told him on the train about a revolution brewing in Sonora, and about certain men in Valido backing the man plotting the revolution.

"All right, boys," Stallman said brusquely. "Bring Reese in."

The room Reese entered was a comfortably furnished office, with Brussels carpet on the floor and deep armchairs placed about the room. Stallman's desk was enormous, and lighted by a red-shaded student lamp. There was a filled bookcase against one wall, and on another a huge map of the State of Sonora. Stallman offered Reese a cigar from a humidor, lighted one for himself when the CPA man declined. He nodded to the two men who had brought Reese, and they went out and closed the door.

Reese brought out "makings'" rolled a cigarette.

"Don't ever have your toughs strong-arm me again, Stallman," he said bluntly, after lighting up. "That's something no man likes."

"My apologies," Stallman said blandly. "I merely gave them orders to ask you to come see me." His cigar lighted, he leaned back comfortably in his swivel chair. He was a cool one. "Matt Tolliver told me that you are with the Cattlemen's Protective Association, and have a reputation as a good man."

Reese waited silently.

"I'll lay my cards on the table, Reese," Stallman went on. "I represent a group of men owning valuable mining properties in Sonora. They have commissioned me to take steps to protect their properties, now that trouble is expected down there. I'm trying to make a deal with some Mexicans—a deal that will keep those mines intact, if the revolution succeeds. Revolutionists always seize properties, especially properties owned by foreigners. But I'm not depending on such a deal alone."

He paused to puff on his cigar, watching Reese intently.

"I'm gathering together a group of good men," he continued. "I plan to take them to the Sonora mining country to guard the properties. I've recruited a dozen men, and there are plenty others drifting into Valido, but they're men who carry their brains in their holsters along with their guns. In a word, Reese, I'm having trouble finding men of intelligence, men I can depend on in a pinch."

"Yeah?" Reese drawled. "Why tell me?"

"I thought you might be interested."

"How so?"

"I'm offering you a job," Stallman said. "As one of my—well, lieutenants. Whatever your monthly CPA salary is, I'll raise it a hundred dollars. And there'll be a substantial bonus in it for you if we succeed in guarding those mining properties. What do you say, Reese?"

REESE considered the burning end of his cigarette, his somber look replaced by a slightly amused smile. Investigators were always being offered bribes, just as he was being offered one now. Stallman was clever. The man made it an offer of a job, but it was still a bribe. Reese shifted his gaze to the man behind the desk.

"I'd have to know more about this deal,"

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MULESHOE MARAUDERS

By D. B. NEWTON

"Ask them."

"Was one of your men named Jake Fargo?"

Stallman's eyes took on a veiled look. "Fargo? I think that's the name of one of the tough hands I enlisted. Why?"

"I had a run-in with him on the train today."

"Oh?"

"And tonight he tried to kill me," Reese said. "Luckily, I was better with a gun that Fargo was. That's one question. Now another. How does Matt Tolliver fit into your game?"

Stallman's veiled expression was more noticeable. And behind it there was sudden anger.

"I give you credit for being smart, Reese," he said harshly, "but don't try to be too smart. Your job would be merely to help me handle and discipline a bunch of tough hands. It wouldn't be to concern yourself with the various angles of this affair. I want you with me, but only on *my* terms."

Reese was still smiling as he rose from the armchair, moved to the desk. He crushed his cigarette in an ashtray.

"Stallman," he said with deliberation, "I don't have to be too smart to see through you. Matt Tolliver wanted a CPA investigator here to get Sam Ames in trouble. The scheme sort of misfired, because I figured that Ames is more honest than Tolliver. So Matt Tolliver talked it over with you, and you decided to offer me this job—only to keep me from digging deeper into this Tolliver-Ames feud."

"Now hold on, Reese—"

"You listen to somebody else for a change, Stallman," Reese cut in. "I don't want your job. I don't take bribes. I'm loyal to the CPA, and it's my job to protect Sam Ames. I'm going to do my job."

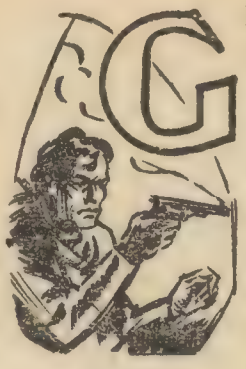
Stallman's face turned a dull red. "All right," he said savagely. "You won't take a bribe, but maybe you'll take some advice."

"I doubt it."

"Get out of Valido, Reese," Stallman said, rising. "Take the next train back to Texas. If you don't follow that advice, my clever friend, it's a good bet that you'll be shipped back to CPA headquarters—in a pine-box!"

CHAPTER VIII

Midnight Warning



GRIPPING the edge of the big desk, Reese was still smiling, but now it was a chill smile. He put his weight against the desk, shoved hard. It slammed into Stallman, rammed him back into his swivel chair, and man and chair toppled over. Stallman lost all his dignity as he spilled to the floor.

"That's for having strong-arm tactics used on me," Reese said. "As for your threat, if there's an attempt on my life, I'm going—"

He broke off, whirled, gun ready as the two burly men burst in from the outer office.

"Take it easy, boys," he said lightly. "And help your boss up. He had a little accident."

He walked past them, slammed the door behind them.

He heard Frank Stallman swearing as he opened the door to the outside steps. His smile was gone now. He had made a dangerous enemy. And his life would be worth little while he remained in Valido.

Reese took a room at the Territorial House. He pulled down the window blind before lighting the lamp, for a man in a lighted room made an easy target for a gunman on a nearby roof.

Reese had hardly taken off his hat and coat when bootsteps sounded in the hall someone knocked on his door.

"It's us, Doc," said Dusty Trail's lowered voice.

Reese told them to enter, and Hank Ball followed his fat partner into the room. The lanky redhead grinned.

"A wild town, Valido," he said. "Anything can happen here, Doc."

This oddly matched pair who were so close that one would gladly give his life for the other—as they would for Steve Reese—though expert range detectives, looked, dressed and acted like a couple of drifting

cowhands who didn't care whether school kept or not. But their appearance was deceptive.

Hank, tall and lanky, red-headed and handsome, was mild-mannered and easy-going—ordinarily. He had a lot of charm, and girls in many parts of the cattle country remembered Hank Ball, no doubt day-dreamed about him. But Hank was not only an expert with the ladies. He was a terror in a fight, both with a gun and his fists, and his temper, as fiery as his hair, was easily aroused by injustice, or anything that threatened these two close friends of his.

Dusty Trail's fat and jovial appearance was a natural mask. His bulk was tough brawn, and he was not lazy either physically or mentally. Like Hank, he had once been a cowhand. There was always a stogie jutting from his pink cherub's face, and that stogie hardly went with the boyishly innocent look in his baby blue eyes. But he was a game and tough fighter, one who could take the buttons off a gambler's vest across the room He made Hank a good saddle mate.

Dusty lighted his "seegar" as soon as he closed the door.

"That's right," Hank said, a wink at Reese. "Light up that rope. This room needs fumigating. Only trouble is, we'll suffocate."

"Crawl back into the woodwork, Redhead," Dusty retorted. "Doc and I have got some talking to do."

"One half of it will be hot-air."

"If I was half as windy as a certain hombre I won't name but could spit on from here—"

Reese laughed. "Skip the feuding, boys," he said. "There's enough of that around these parts, between the Quarter-Moon and the S A." He knew these young fellows too well to take their insulting remarks to each other seriously. "What have you two learned about this town?"

"Well, it's like this, Doc," said Dusty, talking around his cigar. "Hank ain't learned anything, excepting that there's a couple pretty senoritas over in the Mexican quarter. But me—"

[*Turn page*]

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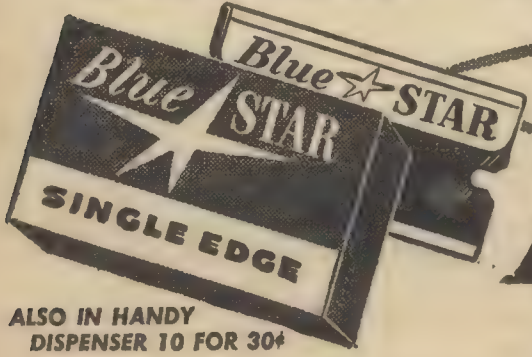

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"I can pass the time of day with a couple of senoritas and still learn more than your fat friend, Doc," Hank said. "Seriously, though, something big is in the air. Last night, Dusty and I got in a fight in a saloon, through no fault of our own. We whipped four hombres. That brand of fighting counts for something here. A man offers us a job, on account of our fighting. Right, Dusty?"

Dusty nodded. "The job is down in Sonora, guarding mining properties," he said earnestly. "At seventy-five and found a month. We said we'd take the job, just to see what would come of it. We were handed ten dollars apiece against our first month's pay, and told to be ready to ride south in a couple days."

Reese nodded. "Stick with that job for a while," he said. "You learn anything about the Wild Tollivers?"

"Matt Tolliver is bad medicine," Hank said. "There's talk that he's got some kind of a deal on with *El Zurriago,* the hombre they call the Whip, and who is plotting a revolution down in Sonora. That's why there are so many toughs here, Doc. They're hoping to join the revolutionists. For pay—and plunder. We didn't find out what Tolliver's connection with *El Zurriago* is, but he's thick as thieves with the boss of this town, Frank Stallman."

"And Stallman is hiring gun hands for Sonora," Dusty added. "Stallman sells mining machinery and suchlike. It looks like he's dealing with *El Zurriago,* through Tolliver."

REESE was beginning to see the pattern. It was possible that Stallman wanted to take gunfighters to Sonora for some purpose other than guarding mining properties. Juan Morales had said that Americans in Valido were furnishing arms to *El Zurriago.* It was unlikely that those men were operating in Valido without Stallman's permission. He probably was in cahoots with them, or even head man. In that case, Stallman didn't fear, but hoped for, the success of the revolution. He wasn't afraid that the revolutionists would seize the mining properties. That wily Frank Stallman talked one way and acted another.

"Hank—Dusty," Reese said, "you two string along with this crowd that's going to Sonora. We've got to find out if Stillman and Tolliver are smuggling guns and ammunition across the Border. Watch yourselves, though. This is a tough town that Stallman bosses."

"Boot-tough," said Hank. "Do we report to you here?"

"Yes," Reese replied. "But be careful that you're not seen." He smiled wryly. "I'm a marked man, boys."

When the two were gone, Reese locked the door and propped the one chair in the room against the doorknob, so no one could enter the room while he slept without forcing the door and raising a racket. He did not darken the room, but merely turned the lamp flame low. He removed his boots, his neckscarf, and gun-belt, then stretched out on the bed.

He lay for a time listening to the rowdy sounds of the town, and smiled a little. This wasn't much of a vacation. He wondered drowsily if Colonel Beauvine had any idea of how involved was this investigation of the theft of a single cow. . . .

He woke with a start, reached for one of his guns.

The sound that had awakened him was not repeated but, listening intently, he heard furtive steps moving away from his door. He rose from the bed, saw that the door was still tightly closed and the chair in place. Moving stealthily closer to the door, he saw a folded paper on the floor. It had been pushed under the door.

Unfolding the paper, he read a brief, pencilled message:

Reese—Warn Sam Ames that his Sonora ranch is to be raided.

It was unsigned, but the CPA man told himself: "Dan Tolliver!"

Dan Tolliver, reluctant to turn against his own kinsmen, but nevertheless struggling with himself, had decided to give Sam Ames warning that a raid was to be made on his ranch south of the Border by the Wild Tollivers!

The young fellow, torn between loyalty to his own flesh and blood and by his love for

Sherry Ames, had left it to Reese to give the warning. He couldn't face Sherry and her father to deliver it himself. He was too ashamed of the Tollivers' perfidy. Yet he wanted to play fair with the Ameses.

Reese decided to ride out to the S A in the morning, and warn Sam Ames.

He rose at dawn, prepared to go out. Before leaving the room, he replaced the two fired shells in his one .38 with fresh cartridges from his cartridge belt. Descending the stairs to the lobby, he saw Dusty Trail strolling into the hotel. They met in the middle of the lobby, under the mildly curious gaze of the hotel proprietor.

"Excuse me, pard," Dusty said loudly. "Can you give me a light?"

Reese halted, found a match, lighted it on his thumb-nail. He held the flame to the cigar Dusty had in his mouth. As the pudgy CPA man bent over the match and puffed, Reese heard him whisper:

"Two big freight rigs left Stallman's warehouse at midnight, loaded plenty heavy. They headed out the south road, towards the Border."

Dusty looked up then, and grinned.

"Thanks, mister," he said. "That does it."

He drifted on toward the door to the hotel dining room. Reese blew out the match flame, tossed the stick into a spittoon, and walked from the hotel. He went for his breakfast to the eating place where he had had supper the night before. And all the time he was eating flapjacks and bacon, and drinking two cups of coffee he was wondering if those freight wagons were loaded with—guns.

VALIDO was not yet wide awake when Reese, mounted on the gray again, rode out of town. He noticed, as he crossed the railroad tracks and took the southeast road, that there was another road bearing due south. Evidently the two freight rigs that had left Stallman's warehouse at midnight had taken that other road. But when the CPA man reached the fork of the southeast road, he pulled in the gray. And stared at the tracks in the dust.

Two wagons had come across the desert from the west and taken the east branch which led to the Quarter-Moon Ranch. The rigs had taken that due-south road so as not to arouse anyone's suspicions, then they had swung across the desert and headed for the Quarter-Moon. Reese was neither puzzled nor surprised when he rode on, but he did wonder if the rurale sergeant, Juan Morales, had learned about those wagons.

It was mid-morning when he reached the S A headquarters. He saw no riders anywhere on the range, and the place seemed deserted. Except for one pinto pony, there were no horses in the corrals. Reese halted

in the ranch yard, looking about, and a voice saying, "What you want, hombre?" gave him a start.

The young Mexican, Pablo, stood in the doorway of the barn, covering the CPA man with his old single-shot Springfield rifle.

"I want to see your boss, son."

"Senor Ames is not here."

"Where is he?"

"Everybody is gone," said Pablo. "I am the only hombre here." His rifle never wavered, nor did his dark eyes. He was the only hombre left at the S A, and he was in earnest about protecting the headquarters. "You go, senor," he added. "Pronto!"

Reese nodded gravely. "Sure, *amigo.*" He lifted his reins, started to turn his gray away. Then he asked, "Did the S A crew head south to the Sonora ranch?"

"*Si.*"

"How long ago did they start out?"

"Before sun-up."

Reese said, "*Gracias,*" and rode away.

At a lope he headed for the Barreras, the low hills that formed a barrier between the S A and the Quarter-Moon ranges.

CHAPTER IX

Across the Border

AN HOUR of steady riding brought Steve Reese onto Quarter-Moon range and he halted on a timbered ridge overlooking its headquarters, focusing his field-glasses on the distant buildings.

There was bustling activity at the Tollivers' place. Two big canvas-sheeted, mule-drawn freight wagons were just pulling away. Their fast pace suggested that they were returning empty to Valido. Reese knew that a big ranch required great quantities of supplies and equipment, and these rigs could have freighted in such innocent cargo.

But it was not probable. Those wagons had not started out from any general store, but from Frank Stallman's Arizona-Sonora Mining Equipment Company warehouse.

Shifting his glasses from the freight rigs to the ranchyard, Reese saw a big bunch of riders was starting out—south. Red-bearded Matt Tolliver was in the lead. Luke and Jess, the latter with his right arm bandaged and in a sling, rode next. A dozen men followed. Three *vaqueros* were handling thirty heavily laden pack mules, and Reese could guess what sort of freight made up their packs.

He would have gambled on it. Guns and ammunition! Arms for *El Zurriago.*

The outfit had hardly left the ranch headquarters when the foremost riders halted. Old Matt Tolliver gestured wildly, and Luke and two other riders left the column. They struck out across the range in Reese's direction. The CPA man was screened by scrub trees, and it didn't seem possible that he had been sighted. Then he realized that Matt Tolliver or another of the bunch must have seen the lenses of his glasses reflecting the sunlight. Old Matt had guessed that someone was spying from the ridge.

The three riders were coming fast, Luke with his rifle across his saddle and the other two with six-shooters in their hands.

Reese put his glasses away, pulled his rifle from its boot. He fired three fast shots, warning shots that kicked up dust in front of the three riders. They pulled up, Luke Tolliver's horse rearing high. Reese fired two more shots, and Luke's companions turned tail. Luke was made of sterner stuff. He brought his mount under control, swung his rifle up, pumped slugs in Reese's direction.

The CPA man could have easily gunned Luke down, but he had neither reason nor desire to kill the man. He turned his horse, rode deeper into the low hills. He kept pushing the gray, and finally quartered down a brushy slope onto S A range. He saw nothing more of the Quarter-Moon riders.

He traveled perhaps five miles before his ever alert instinct warned him to rein in. Peering about, he saw nothing but peacefully grazing cattle, at first. But presently he sighted a rider, so far behind him that the horseman was a tiny speck topping a grassy rise. He brought out his binoculars, but still the distance was too great for him to recognize the horseman.

Riding on, Reese decided that it was Luke Tolliver. The man was mule-stubborn enough to keep on a man's trail like that, and he had nerve enough to follow alone. Reese glanced back occasionally, but the rider hadn't shortened the distance between them. Reese began to doubt that it was Luke.

A dozen miles south of S A headquarters the fine pasture gave way to bunch grass. Gradually the country grew wilder, more like desert. There were rocky stretches, and the grass was sparse. The soil had a thirsty look. There was mesquite, greasewood, cactus. Reese finally sighted a barbed-wire drift fence, and figured that he had reached the Border as well as the southern boundary of S A range. He found a gate and, on the Sonora side, took cover among a cluster of huge boulders. Once more he focussed his field-glasses on the rider trailing him.

It was not Luke, but Dan Tolliver.

Reese waited, intending to suggest that, since they were both trying to overtake the S A outfit, they ride together. But evidently Dan suspected that Reese was wait-

ing and for some reason of his own did not desire company, for he disappeared somewhere in that broken country. Reese waited for perhaps half an hour, but did not see him again.

Riding on, at sundown the CPA man came within sight of the S A outfit going into camp by a small creek. There were ten riders besides Sam Ames and Sherry, and three were Mexican *vaqueros*. Another Mexican drove the chuckwagon and served as cook. The outfit was traveling with a sizable remuda.

SINCE this was below the Border and lonely country, the S A hands watched Reese ride up with a certain wariness until Sam and his daughter recognized him. Those two came forward to meet him. The old rancher offered his hand when Reese had dismounted.

"Want to thank you for siding me in town last night," Ames said heartily. His left eye was black from the manhandling given him by the Tollivers. "What are you doing down this way, though?"

Reese smiled, glanced at the girl. "A man doesn't need a reason for riding this way, does he?"

Sherry laughed a little. "You can't flatter me that way," she said. "I know you didn't ride so far just to see me."

Reese took the warning note from his pocket, handed it to Sam Ames.

"This was slipped under the door of my hotel room during the night," he said.

As the old rancher read the message, Sherry looked over her father's shoulder.

"That's Dan's handwriting!" she exclaimed. "But how can he know about such a thing?"

Her father looked up, his craggy face stiff with anger.

"If Dan wrote this," he said, "he didn't mean that any Mexican revolutionists are going to raid the ranch. You agree, Reese?"

"I think he means the Wild Tollivers plan to raid it."

"Yeah!"

"But why?" said Sherry. "Would they —dare?"

Ames nodded jerkily. "I'm beginning to savvy why Matt Tolliver tried so hard to have me thrown in jail on a rustling charge. He knew that I would move my Sonora herd across the Border, and he wanted to keep me from doing it. He's planning to steal that herd, when this fool revolution breaks out! I figured the only danger was in *El Zurriago* seizing my cattle to feed his ragtag army, but now . . . Why, the dirty son! And he tried to make me out a rustler!"

"How many cattle in your Sonora herd?" Reese asked.

"About three thousand head."

"It would make a fine haul."

"Sure," Ames said. "And he could sneak those cattle off to some hide-out range and let me think the revolutionists ran them off! That is, he could have if I'd been jailed. The ornery cuss was willing to sacrifice a valuable critter like that Brahma bull to frame me. But it's the Quarter-Moon's loss. It ain't nothing out of his pocket!"

Reese nodded agreement. "We've Dan to thank for this warning, and it must have been the hardest thing that young fellow ever did—telling on his own kinfolks," he said. "But you've got no time to waste, Sam. Matt Tolliver and his crew are on their way south, right now."

"You sure of that?"

"I saw them starting out from the Quarter-Moon," the CPA man replied. "They're traveling with a big string of pack-mules, and I believe those mules are carrying arms to *El Zurriago.*"

"What?" Sam Ames exploded. "Matt Tolliver a smuggler!"

"Yeah. He's working hand-in-glove with Frank Stallman. And Stallman has a deal on with *El Zurriago.* The way I figure it, Stallman is supplying *El Zurriago* with arms and expects to be paid with mining properties. He couldn't run the guns across the Border by any main road, because of the Customs officers. So he dealt Matt Tolliver in."

"I get it. Tolliver will run the guns down across the Quarter-Moon."

"And his pay will come from you."

"Yeah," said Ames, and swore bitterly. "He'll raid my ranch when the revolution breaks out. *El Zurriago* will let him run

off my herd!" He turned back to the camp. "Boys," he called out. "I've just got word that the devil's own ructions are about to pop down at the ranch. And we ain't got much time. We'll eat, then ride. What sleep we get tonight will be in the saddle!"

Sam Ames had a good, loyal crew. Not a man protested and, after chuck, there was no grumbling as the hands shifted their saddles to fresh mounts from the remuda.

"You going along, Reese?" Ames asked.

"Unless you say you don't want me along," the CPA man replied, smiling. "Colonel Beauvine would want me in on this game, since you're a CPA member. Anyway, I'm half on a vacation, and can do as I like." He glanced worriedly at Sherry. "You sure your daughter should go along? It won't be any picnic."

"I want her to go back home," Ames said. "I offered to send one of the boys back with her, but she won't hear to it. She says if I send her back, she'll trail us. A strong-willed girl, that daughter of mine."

"Suppose I talk to her?"

"Do that."

REESE crossed to where Sherry was watching a *vaquero* saddle a fresh pony for her. She turned to him, and said, before he could speak:

"Save your breath, Mr. Reese." Her smile took the bluntness from her words. "Where Dad goes, I go. I only feel that he's safe when I'm close enough to keep an eye on him." She touched Reese's arm, lowered her voice. "He's growing old, you know. He never lets on, but I know his heart bothers him a great deal. You understand, don't you? I've got to be with him all I can."

"I understand, Sherry."

"Don't be afraid that I'll get in the way."

"I'm afraid something may happen to you," he said gravely. "You're right about your father being old and perhaps about his heart being bad. But it would kill him if you came to some harm. Too, you must consider that there is another man important to you."

"You mean—?"

"Dan."

"He's been avoiding me lately."

"Only because of the other Tollivers," Reese told her. "He's tormented by the knowledge of their crookedness. And besides, he's riding down this way. He trailed me south across S A range. He must know you're with the outfit, and is worrying about it, and your safety."

Sherry's eyes glowed. "Thanks for telling me that, Mr. Reese," she said huskily. "Dan does mean so much to me."

"I envy him his luck," Reese said, smiling.

But before she could answer that, somebody called out:

"Riders coming!"

There were a dozen riders. Mexicans. Big sombreros, serapes, bandoliers across their chests. Well-mounted, heavily armed. They rode in a column of twos.

An S A hand whispered tensely: "Revolutionists?"

One of the *vaqueros,* said: "No. Rurales!"

They came on through the thickening dusk, straight toward the camp, halting in a line abreast within easy revolver range. The leader came on alone, slow-walking his horse, and demanded, reining in:

"Who is boss here, senores?"

Sam Ames stepped forward, gave his name.

"What you do here in Sonora, senor?"

"I'm taking my outfit to my ranch at Rio Mohoso," the rancher replied. "I aim to round up my cattle there and drive them across the Border, hold them there until this revolution trouble blows over."

The rurale nodded. He was a thin man with a hawkish face.

"I know of you, Senor Ames," he said, "and that you have a ranch at Rio Mohoso. You have permission to go on. But I give you a warning, *amigo.* Be on guard. There are rumors that the revolutionists will strike tonight—*media noche.*"

All the while he spoke, the rurale's beady black eyes searched the camp. Evidently he was convinced that the party was nothing more than a cow outfit, for some of the grimness left his thin face.

Steve Reese stepped forward. "Senor, I have a friend who is a rurale—Senor Juan

Morales," he said, and saw the man nod. "Morales was in Valido, Arizona, recently. He told me he wanted to find out who the Americans are that furnish *El Zurriago* with arms. I don't know what Morales found out, but I learned that some sort of freight —guns and ammunition, I believe—is being moved across the Border by way of the Quarter-Moon Ranch."

"Ah?"

"Senor Morales might like to know about it."

"*Si,*" said the rurale. "He will hear of it."

His face had turned grim again, and he turned away with a curt nod. The band rode on through the thickening dusk.

CHAPTER X

La Revolución

DARKNESS came, and a blood-red moon rose. The S A outfit followed a road that wended through an occasional village and past isolated *ranchos.* There were no lights anywhere, and no people showed themselves as the Americans rode by. It was as though these places had been abandoned. But the riders knew that the peons and *rancheros* were in their houses, awaiting the hour when terror would be let loose upon the land.

"*Media noche,*" the rurale had said. Midnight.

At midnight the outfit was still thirty miles from the ranch at Rio Mohoso. Sam Ames led the outfit off the road, for there was a town of some size ahead and there was sure to be fighting in or about it. As they circled the town, from it came a sudden burst of gunfire. The shooting grew in volume. The outfit was close enough to see powder-flashes. They pushed on rapidly. The chuckwagon and the remuda kept up with the riders, for Sam Ames kept the outfit one compact unit.

Horsemen swept by, shadowy figures in the darkness. Some singly, some in pairs, some in groups. Peons, farmers, sheepherders, vaqueros. There was never any lack of fighting-men when the cry "*La Revolucion!*" rose in Mexico.

Once when the riders paused to rest their mounts atop a rocky rise, the moonlight showed them below a long column of uniformed riders traveling at a canter on the road.

One of Ames' *vaqueros* whispered: "Federal soldiers!"

In the gray dawn, the outfit forded a shallow creek—the Rio Mohoso. Beyond was Sam Ames' range. They halted on the south side of the creek, tired riders dismounting from tired mounts. One of the *vaqueros* unhitched the chuckwagon mules while another helped the cook gather brush for a breakfast fire. As daylight came, Steve Reese saw that the grassland extended for miles to a craggy mountain range.

After breakfast, most of the hands spread out their bedrolls to get some sleep. Sam Ames decided to ride on the five miles to the ranch headquarters, and Reese and Sherry went with him. A man leaning against the pole fence of a corral that was empty except for a couple of horses watched them ride up.

"Hank Warden," Ames told Reese. "My foreman."

Hank came forward, a little bowlegged man with a slow grin. He said, "Hiya, boss—Hello, Miss Sherry," in a drawling voice, and gave Reese a nod. "Been hoping you'd show up, Sam."

"You alone, Hank?"

"Yeah. *La revolución.* My *vaqueros* quit on me yesterday."

"To throw in with El Zurriago?"

Hank nodded. "Sure. Those Mexican cowhands will throw in with any hombre who promises them a fight. You aimin' to round up the cattle and trail 'em north?"

Ames nodded. "Good idea, eh?"

Hank Warden lighted a brown-paper cigarette before replying. "Guess so," he replied then. "The grapevine says this is going to be a real fight. Rode over to the Ventura Mine yesterday, to talk with John Forbes. He says all *Yanquis* at the mines are all upset. A lot of their miners have walked

out to join *El Zurriago*. The others are refusing to work, claiming that *El Zurriago* is going to kick out their *Americano* bosses."

"Well, we'll start the roundup after the boys have some shut-eye," Ames said. He stared at the nearly empty corral. "The hands take your horses, Hank?"

"They left me that pair," Hank said drily. "One for a mount and the other to carry my gear. They figured I'd want to head for home."

"Pretty sure of themselves, ain't they?"

"They've got a lot of faith in *El Zurriago*."

"Figure he'll take over Sonora?"

Hank nodded. "They're dead-sure of it. And they believe he'll rid Sonora of *gringos*. The poor fools don't realize that they'll be just be saddling themselves with another bunch of bosses. Maybe a lot worse bunch. I'd bet a month's pay *El Zurriago* ain't out to help nobody but himself."

"Himself and his friends," growled old Sam Ames. "And Matt Tolliver is one of them!"

THE ROUNDUP began that afternoon. Steve Reese rode with the S A riders, and even Sherry Ames lent a hand. The girl attached herself to the CPA man and, with such a companion, running down half-wild cattle was more sport than work. Dan Tolliver certainly was a lucky man.

At sundown there were more than two thousand head in one great bunch, and four of the hands were left to drive them toward Rio Mohoso.

"Keep 'em moving," Sam Ames told them. "Some of the others will spell you at midnight."

The rest of the crew headed back to camp, and Miguel, the cookie, had supper waiting. Darkness came, and they kept the fire blazing high. It was peaceful here on this valley range, but Steve Reese wondered if it wasn't just the calm before the storm. That they should complete the gather and trail north without trouble didn't seem possible.

True, Reese had informed the rurales about the guns being smuggled down from the Quarter-Moon Ranch. But now that the revolution had burst bloodily upon the land, it might well be that the rurales would be too occupied with putting down the insurrection to have time to deal with the Tolliver crowd. Mexico City probably hadn't sent enough *soldados* to Sonora to handle the situation, and the rurales, being the Government's best fighting men, would necessarily be forced to play a big part in the fighting.

Another eight hundred head of S A cattle were gathered off the range the next day, and thrown in with the larger bunch. There were still several hundred head of stock that had been missed, Hank Warden told his boss, but Ames was willing to leave them rather than to delay their departure.

The riders were told to get some sleep, and at midnight mounts were saddled. The bedded-down herd was roused, put into motion, strung out. The chuckwagon traveled just ahead of the point riders, and the wrangler hazed the remuda along off to the right flank. Sam Ames rode in the lead, scouting ahead, and Steve Reese stayed with him.

The cowhands yelped, shouted and swore at the cattle. The cattle bawled in their mournful way. The night was dark, the moon hidden much of the time by clouds and hazy the rest of the time. It was a good night for trailing a herd through dangerous country, but daylight would come all too soon—and find the outfit in the open, in country overrun by armed bands.

By dawn the herd had traveled five or six miles from Rio Mohoso, and it was then that the first riders were sighted.

First a horseman topped a rocky rise, watched the herd for a time, then disappeared. Shortly a dozen riders appeared on the rise, also scrutinizing the gringo outfit from beneath their sombreros. They rode down then, with a definite hostility in their manner.

Sam Ames left four men to keep the cattle moving, and gathered the others about him. Sherry was told to stay close to the chuckwagon. The Americans sat their horses, watched the Mexicans approach.

"No shooting," Ames ordered, "unless they start it."

Another band of eight riders appeared on the crest of the rocky swell and watched

their *companeros.* The nearer riders were well-mounted, but poorly armed. Some did have six-shooters, and a couple carried Winchester rifles, but most were armed with old single-shot rifles, ancient shotguns. One man held a muzzle-loading rifle, another a cap-and-ball revolver.

Most were poorly dressed, and some wore sandals instead of boots. Their sombreros were of straw. Peons. But peons turned *soldados*—or *bandidos.*

They were dangerous men in spite of their poor arms.

A swarthy man with a badly pockmarked face demanded:

"You, gringos! Where you take *el rebano?"*

"Across the Border, hombre," Sam Ames told him. "It's my herd. You see the brand? The cattle are mine."

"No gringo. The cattle belong to *El Zurriago!"*

"I'll argue that, any day."

"Como?"

Ames gestured toward his men. "We've got better guns than you, hombre. If you want to die for *El Zurriago,* just try to take my cattle. But if you try it, you'll never eat beef again. Now vamoose. Pronto!"

The man with the pitted face looked from one *Americano* to another. He was no fool. He was well aware that these riders were better armed than most of his *companeros,* and no doubt he saw that they possessed the will to fight. He suddenly looked uneasy. But now the second group of horsemen came forward.

SEVEN of this bunch were much like the others in appearance, but one, mounted on a white horse, was different. He called out something in Spanish, then spoke in English.

"What is the trouble here, senores? There should be no argument about giving up cattle to *El Zurriago's* soldiers. All livestock now belong to the revolutionary forces. My general has said this, senores."

He was a young man, lighter of complexion than most of his countrymen. He wore a military tunic, part of the blue uniform of the Mexican army. His hat was a black Stetson, and he wore gray whipcord breeches with shiny military boots. He was armed with a revolver and a saber.

"I am Captain Diego," he announced haughtily. "My orders are—"

"Captain, you know what you can do with your orders." Sam Ames growled, drew his gun and leveled the long-barreled Colt at Diego.

Alarm knifed through Steve Reese. He had seen what the old rancher had missed. The seven men who had ridden up with Diego were now circling around to the rear of the S A riders. The dozen men facing the Americans had furtively cocked their weapons. The pockmarked man had a Winchester rifle, and its muzzle was pointed at Sam Ames.

Captain Diego lifted a hand, stroked his small, neat mustache, and smiled.

"Senor, my life compared to the cause of *El Zurriago* is as nothing. You kill me, but you will die before my body falls to

[*Turn page*]

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the ground. One word from me now, and my *compadres—"*

"You ain't got the nerve to say it, hombre!" Ames shouted.

Reese gigged his horse closer to the rancher, reached out and grabbed at the rancher's gun. He realized that such a play was the only chance of averting bloodshed. Or rather, of postponing it.

Reese managed to wrench the gun from Ames's hand without having it go off. The old rancher swore lustily, then, upon seeing how many guns covered him, his temper cooled.

"Take it easy," Reese said. "This is bad trouble, and it's got to be handled right. It's not just a matter of fighting this bunch."

He realized that there probably were hundreds of *El Zurriago's* men between that spot and the far-off Border.

CHAPTER XI

Armed Camps

CAPTAIN DIEGO was still smiling. The man possessed the bravado that was so often a characteristic of his type of Mexican.

"Senor," he said mockingly, "you are one gringo with good sense. I will talk to you, but not to the old hombre."

Reese nodded. "Have your say, Captain."

"I want bloodshed no more than you, senor," said Diego. "We will settle this peaceably. There is good graze a few miles east. You *Americanos* will drive the herd there, with my command escorting you. We will wait at that place until *El Zurriago* himself arrives to deal with you. You understand, senor?"

Reese nodded, then looked at Sam Ames.

The rancher didn't like the idea, but he realized that he must go along with it or start a bloody fight.

"All right," he said sourly. "We'll play it his way—for the time being."

Reese gave him his gun, and Ames rode back to the herd with his men. The CPA man looked at Diego, his dark eyes somber.

"This is all a bad mistake, Captain."

"Ah?"

"We know what *El Zurriago* plans to do with these S A cattle."

Diego shrugged. "Soldiers must eat, senor," he said simply. "In wartime lives are worth little—and property even less. It will be a long fight, maybe, and *El Zurriago* will have to feed many men. You Americans who have made use of this land will now have to pay. It is only fair, I think."

"We don't admit that *El Zurriago* has the right to make us pay," Reese stated. "Besides, your general doesn't want the S A cattle to feed his soldiers. He means to turn them over to another American outfit. A case of robbing Peter to pay Paul. You savvy?"

"Senor, you know more than I have been told," Diego said curtly. "I have my orders. The herd is not to be permitted to leave Mexico. I will carry out those orders!"

The great herd was pointed east under the guns of the revolutionists. Steve Reese joined Sam Ames.

"It's a tight spot," he said. "We haven't one chance in a thousand of getting through to the Border."

Ames nodded gloomily. "I didn't count on them jumping us right at the start," he muttered. "What would you do in my place, Reese? Let those *bandidos* have the herd?"

"I'd hold out a while longer."

"I lost my temper back there," said the old man. "But I don't want to see men die to hold onto this herd. I'll hold out, like you say—but only until I'm sure there's no hope of reaching the Border."

"Maybe *El Zurriago* will back down," Reese explained, "when we tell him to his face that we know that he plans to turn the herd over to Matt Tolliver."

"That won't worry him any—not an hombre like this *El Zurriago."*

"It will worry Matt Tolliver," Reese said insinuatingly.

"How so?"

Reese shrugged. "No matter how ornery

Matt is, he won't be fool enough to make off with a herd owned by another American once he realizes that you know what he's up to. He counted on you not finding out. On anybody finding out. T'd bet Matt Tolliver won't touch this herd with a ten-foot pole when he finds out you're down here."

"Maybe you're right," Ames said bitterly. "But *El Zurriago* won't let three thousand head of cattle slip through *his* fingers. He'll grab them to feed his troops. Or maybe to stock some ranch he owns or plans to seize as plunder. Maybe he even figured on doublecrossing Matt Tolliver. Plenty of these revolutionists are as crooked as a dog's hind leg!"

Reese nodded. He was beginning to believe that the herd could be saved only by some miracle.

The cattle were driven onto a flat, and the S A crew went into camp. Captain Diego's command also made camp, some distance away. Not far off was a little adobe village.

During the day bands of riders passed along the road, heading north. Ox- and mule-drawn *carretas* and pack-animals also passed, also heading north. Evidently *El Zurriago* was forcing the fight in the upper part of Sonora. It was sound strategy, Steve Reese reflected. If *El Zurriago's* guerrilla troops defeated the few Federal soldiers and rurales in the north, the revolutionist leader would then be able to sweep south and meet whatever force was sent to Sonora from Mexico City.

WAITING for *El Zurriago's* arrival stretched Sam Ames' patience thin, but the S A hands took things easy. At sundown an outfit appeared on the north road, approaching the village at a fast pace.

"El Zurriago?" Ames asked, seeing Reese gazing at the outfit through his field-glasses.

The CPA man shook his head. There was a rocky look on his bronzed face as he lowered the binoculars, and said:

"Americans."

"The Tolliver crowd?"

"No. Frank Stallman with a bunch of hired gunslingers."

It was a tough-looking outfit of two dozen riders with Stallman, traveling wth six horses under pack. Reese watched them enter the village, and made out two familiar figures—Dusty Trail's roly-poly one and Hank Ball's lanky one. Their presence gave the CPA field chief's spirits a lift.

Somehow he would have to get in touch with them.

The outfit halted in the village, Reese was glad to see, intending to make their night stop there. Captain Diego left his camp with four of his men and rode to the village, evidently to find out what this band of *Americanos* was doing in Sonora at such a time. It was beginning to look as if the captain was not in *El Zurriago's* confidence, and was obeying orders blindly. That was to be expected, of course. *El Zurriago* would not reveal his secret dealings to any but his closest followers—a handful of schemers like himself.

Reese told Sam Ames about the two CPA men being with Stallman's crowd.

"They should know his plans by now, and it looks as though something big is brewing. I'm going to the village as soon as it's dark."

He waited until after supper, when it was hazy dusk. He feared that Diego's men would turn him back if they saw him, so he forded the shallow river water. On the far bank, brush screened him. It was full dark by the time he reached the stone bridge leading to the village.

The Stallman outfit had halted in the plaza, but most of the men, Stallman included, had gone into a *cantina*. Few villagers were in evidence. Reese took it for granted that most of the men had gone to join *El Zurriago's* army, and the women and children were sensibly indoors. Keeping to the shadows of the huts, Reese gained the plaza without being challenged. He slipped into the deep doorway of the church, and from there had a good view of his surroundings. Loud voices rose in the *cantina*, where Stallman and his men no doubt were eating peppery Mexican food, and washing it down with *tequilla*.

Two men stood in the darkness before the cantina, and Reese had a hunch who they were, but he didn't want to gamble on it. No use taking too great chances with a man

like Frank Stallman who meant his threat to send the CPA field chief back to Austin in a pine box.

Suddenly a match flared across the plaza, and its flickering glare showed Reese the face of pudgy Dusty Trail. Dusty was lighting one of his stogies. Undoubtedly the other man was Hank Ball. The pair would be holding themselves aloof from the rest of the crowd as much as they could, but by now were probably wishing that the man they called Doc were there to tell them what to do. Reese smiled in the darkness.

He recalled a favorite tune of Hank Ball's —"Saddle Old Spike, I Tell You." Hank loved to dance to that, when he had a girl and an opportunity to dance, and the redhead was often whistling or humming the time, to Dusty's decision.

Reese pursed his lips and whistled a few bars. He waited, listening, and smiled again when he heard Hank pick up the tune.

Casually then, the two men drifted across the plaza. They neared the church, but did not see Reese in its doorway until he called softly: "Here, *amigos!*"

They hurried up the steps, joined him in the shadows.

"Doc," whispered Dusty, "for once that loco tune sounded like music. I'm telling you, we're glad to see you!"

"Yeah, Doc," said Hank. "For once Dusty is talking gospel truth. We've been plenty worried. We'd just decided to grab our horses and go over the hill, right when we heard you whistling. We didn't know whether you'd come down here or had stayed north of the Border where hombres like us belong."

"I came along with the S A crew."

"We heard Stallman talking it over with a couple of his gun rannies," Dusty said, "sayin' that Sam Ames had brought his crew down. What's going on, anyway?"

REESE told them about the herd, explaining that a band of revolutionists had forced the S A crew to go into camp just below the village.

"I hate to see Sam lose his cattle," he said soberly. "There are about three thousand head in that herd—worth at least sixty thousand dollars. But I don't see how he can get away with them. He's waiting for El Zurriago to show up, hoping to make some kind of agreement with him. He won't get much out of him, though, I'm afraid, unless *El Zurriago* is losing this crazy war he started."

"He sure ain't losin'," Hank muttered. "All along the trail today peons told us how his army is whipping the Federals."

"And Stallman is feeling plenty good about it, Doc," Dusty said. "He's a sidewinder, if there ever was one, and he's got a deal on with *El Zurriago*. That hombre is going to use those gunslingers of his to grab a lot of American-owned minin' properties. He'll run them, and cut *El Zurriago* in on the profits—a big steal. Stallman will be a mighty rich man when this is all over."

"Sure," Reese said, his voice grim and hard. "He'll get rich by wading through the blood of a lot of poor dumb peons. And all it's cost him is the price of a couple thousand rifles!"

"*El Zurriago* didn't get those rifles yet," Hank said. "That's keepin' Stallman from being too happy. If *El Zurriago* doesn't get delivery on those guns, he's going to be plenty mad at that tinhorn."

"Matt Tolliver is bringing the arms," informed Reese.

"Yeah. But he's mighty slow in showing up with them."

"What do you mean, Hank?" Reese asked. "Do you think—"

Dusty broke in, "The Tolliver outfit was to run the guns—twelve hundred Winchester rifles—across the Border by way of the Quarter-Moon range. That would have brought the Tolliver bunch down along what they call Smugglers' Trail. Pretty wild country. Mexican *contrabandistos* used to smuggle gold and silver up to Tucson by that way in the old days. But—"

"Yeah," said Hank. "But they ain't come. Stallman was to meet 'em at a place called Penasco, at sun-up this morning. We were there, and a bunch of rurales came along. They wanted to know what we were up to. Stallman gave 'em the story about how he was on his way to guard those mining properties against the revolutionists. The

rurales told him to move on. That was about mid-morning, long after Matt Tolliver should have shown up. We moved, pronto. Maybe Matt Tolliver found out about those rurales watching Smugglers' Trail."

Reese nodded. "It could be," he said, and hoped it was like that. Without those modern rifles *El Zurriago* likely would be defeated. "But I'd like to make sure Tolliver got caught, or turned back to the Quarter-Moon. You boys know how to find this Smugglers' Trail?"

"Sure," said Hank, and Dusty nodded. "In the dark, blindfolded."

"Let's get moving, then."

"We'll be with you as soon as we get our horses," Hank drawled. "Where'll we meet you, Doc?"

"South of the bridge, across the river," Reese told them. "In half an hour. I'll have to go after my horse, too."

CHAPTER XII

El Zurriago

LEAVING the church doorway, Dusty and Hank strode across the *plaza*. Reese moved through the darkness toward the bridge. As he neared the stone structure a drumming of hoofs sounded, and a big bunch of riders came pounding across. Reese darted into a dark alleyway, pressed close against an adobe wall.

A score or more of Mexicans galloped into the plaza.

"El Zurriago!" their cries rang out. *"El Zurriago—General mío!"*

Doors burst open and people ran from their houses. A man with a lantern came from the *cantina*. There was instant milling and confusion. Horses reared, men shouted. Peons cheered. The lantern was held high, and in its yellow glow Steve Reese had a glimpse of *El Zurriago*.

He was a beefy man in a gaudy uniform, and was mounted on a fine black horse. He had piercing black eyes and a heavy black mustache. And, even though he smiled beamingly on the peons, his face looked brutal.

It was a familiar face to Reese, for the CPA field chief had seen his man before, in Frank Stallman's office.

The yelling continued and the crowd grew. The peons in this village, perhaps all over Sonora, were behind *El Zurriago*. It was always like that in Mexico when a new leader rose. The people took such a man at his word, believed his promises that he was fighting for them. Never did they realize that, if successful, such men, like this brutish one, would be their master. And certainly a cruel and treacherous one. They did not seem to understand that the name he had taken for himself might have significance for them.

El Zurriago—the Whip.

Reese moved away, pitying those people, wishing he could do something to save them from their folly. But he was only a range detective. He could not work miracles!

When he got back to the cow outfit's camp, Sam Ames asked him;

"What's going on over in the village?"

The old rancher was uneasy. That suited Reese. If Ames was aware how serious his situation was, he would be careful not to do anything rash that would cause the revolutionists to retaliate.

"El Zurriago just rode in with a bodyguard," the CPA man said, "and the peons are giving him a big welcome. He's probably here to talk to Frank Stallman, about Matt Tolliver's failure to deliver that shipment of guns."

"Tolliver didn't show up?"

"No. And rurales chased the Stallman crowd away from the rendezvous. Maybe they caught the Tolliver crowd, maybe not. Those gun-runners may have holed up."

"Here's hopin' they got caught," Ames growled.

Reese nodded. "I'm hoping that, too. It's my idea that *El Zurriago's* revolution will turn into a fiasco if he doesn't get those rifles. My partners and I are riding to Smugglers' Trail to head off Matt Tolliver, if he hasn't been caught by those rurales."

"You'll be running a mighty big risk."

"But for high stakes."

Sam Ames stared at him. "I don't savvy. There's no stake in it for you, unless you mean to deal with *El Zurriago*—if you got those guns from the Tolliver crowd—which ain't likely. And I don't believe you'd turn crooked."

Reese smiled. "Thanks," he said. "But if *El Zurriago* doesn't get delivery on those guns, he won't have to pay Matt Tolliver. He may be so worked up about it he'll forget all about taking your herd. In that case, I'd be giving you real CPA protection."

To Ames' craggy face came a broad grin.

"That's more than any member could expect of the CPA, Reese," he said, and thrust out his hand. "Go to it. I don't see how three hombres can buck the Wild Tollivers, but I wish you luck."

They shook hands, and Reese saddled his gray horse.

"There's one thing, Sam," he said, after mounting. "If *El Zurriago* tries to seize your herd, let him have it. Your crew is badly outnumbered."

"I savvy," the rancher said. "I won't make any fool play."

FORDING the river, Reese heard a whistled signal from the brush. He answered it, and Dusty and Hank loomed through the darkness. They rode north at a walk, until well beyond the bridge. Rowdy voices still sounded from the village.

"The peons are talking about celebrating *El Zurriago's* victory with a fiesta," Hank drawled, "but *el general* ain't too happy. In the *cantina* he lost his smile pronto when he talked to Frank Stallman. That tinhorn was havin' a hard time explainin' about those guns."

"The revolutionists are poorly armed," Reese said. "*El Zurriago* struck too soon. He should have waited until he got delivery on those guns. How is the fighting going?"

"*El Zurriago* did some braggin'," Dusty said. "Told 'em his *soldados* had overrun all the northern part of Sonora. He told it different to Stallman. He said to him that a big force of Federals is forted up in a town called Santa Rosita, about fifteen miles north of here. His troops have the soldiers surrounded, but the Federals are better armed. *El Zurriago* says his whole campaign is endangered because he didn't get them guns. He blames Stallman, and he's plenty riled."

"What's Stallman saying?"

"He kept sayin' the guns would be here in a day or two," Hank Ball said. "But *El Zurriago* wouldn't listen to him."

They rode for perhaps a mile through the darkness before Reese spoke again.

"*El Zurriago's* next step will be to start a search," he said then. "He'll not let a small detachment of rurales keep him from getting those rifles. We'll have to keep an eye on our back-trail."

They avoided the road and the towns where *El Zurriago's* riders might be encountered. Cutting across open country, they circled wide about isolated *ranchos*. The country grew rougher and hilly. By midnight, when they halted to rest their horses, they had covered a dozen miles.

There was wild country beyond the hills, Hank told Reese. *Malpais*. And Smugglers' Trail ran through it. The place where Stallman had hoped to rendezvous with Matt Tolliver was a deserted village called Penasco.

They rode warily now, halting occasionally to listen. But the night was still, almost ominously still. If the Tolliver outfit was nearby, it was in hiding. They halted in a brush thicket finally, and saw a cluster of adobe huts in a hollow. There was also a dull red glow beyond the deserted village. A dying campfire.

"Maybe the rurales," Dusty whispered.

Reese nodded. He dismounted, handed his gray's reins to Dusty and said, low-voiced, "I'll make sure."

He went on afoot, uncertain what sort of reception three Americans would get from the rurales at such a time. If the men encamped here were rurales, it might be best to avoid them. When Reese gained the nearest of the crumbling dobes, he pressed himself into the deep shadow of its wall.

Beyond the buildings, a figure moved past the embers of the fire—a Mexican who wore a steeple-crowned sombrero and had a serape draped about his shoulders. The man was on sentry duty.

Three other men were bedded down by the dying campfire, and beyond them four horses were picketed. Reese withdrew. They were rurales all right, left at this spot on the chance that the smugglers would show up, while the rest of the rurale detachment moved on.

Back in the brush, Reese told his aides what he'd seen.

"One thing is certain," he said. "The Tolliver crowd didn't get this far. They either turned back to the Quarter-Moon or holed up somewhere."

"From what I saw of old Matt Tolliver," Hank whispered, "he's not one to back down. I reckon he got wind of the rurales and did go into hidin'. But he wouldn't stay in hidin'."

"Smart, this redhead, Doc," Dusty said mockingly. "What did Matt do? Sprout wings and fly somewheres?"

"That brain of yours is too clogged with fat to figure out what a hombre like Matt Tolliver would do," Hank retorted. "Doc, them gun-smugglers swung far east of here, deeper into the badlands. Maybe we can pick up their trail, if we ride in that direction."

"It's a chance," Reese said, mounting. "Let's go."

The farther they rode, the wilder the country became—rock and brush and cactus. Steve Reese realized it was the sort of country the Wild Tollivers would favor. He called a halt finally, to wait for daylight so they could cut for sign.

BOTH Dusty and Hank had grub in their saddle-bags, and the three CPA men breakfasted by a desert water-hole at dawn. When they mounted again, Reese said, "We can cover a lot more ground by separating. We'll meet here at the water-hole at midday."

He rode for a couple miles, then quartered up a rocky slope. From its crest he had view of a vast expanse of desert. With his field-glasses he conned the waste land.

Nothing.

He and his partners and the rurales at the deserted village seemed to be the only human beings in that great empty country. He rolled and lighted a cigarette, then had another long look with his glasses. He was just about to put them back in his saddle-bag when he noticed a movement at the base of the cliffs at the edge of the desert flats. He made out a long line of riders and pack-animals. A brief smile touched his lips.

Turning back toward the water-hole, Reese saw Hank Ball, to the north, searching the ground for tracks. Reese swung toward him. Hank rode to meet his chief.

"Cut their sign, Doc?" he asked.

"They're trailing close to those rock hills over to the east," Reese said. "I'll keep them in sight while you pick up Dusty. And maybe you'd better ride to Penasco and tell those rurales that we've spotted the gun smugglers."

Reese rode on, and in an hour again picked up the Tolliver outfit with his glasses. He watched them from the cover of some rocks and brush. They were traveling at a fast walk, old Matt Tolliver in the lead with his rifle across his saddle. Riders flanked the pack-string. It would be a tough outfit to stop. Matt Tolliver's stake was a small fortune in cattle, and he wouldn't be bluffed out of it. More important than the actual value of the SA herd perhaps was the chance to pay off a grudge. The old rannihan would be anxious to get even with Sam Ames, the man he had hated for so many years.

There were seventeen riders with Matt, two of them his sons and three of them *vaqueros* handling the pack-mules. The others were Quarter-Moon hands, no doubt men to whom Matt Tolliver paid fighting wages. Reese frowned grimly as he considered those odds. Even if those four rurales came with Dusty and Hank . . .

Behind Reese there was a sound like that of a boot scuffing rock.

He had dismounted to watch the Tolliver outfit, and now his horse was a dozen steps away. He was surrounded by a tangle of brush and a jumble of rocks, cover for half a dozen men who might be sneaking up on him. He put the binoculars back into their case, slung it from his left shoulder by its strap, and dropped his hands to his guns.

There was a metallic click as a gun-hammer was cocked.

"Don't move, Reese!" a voice said harshly.

"You're covered, and I'll drop you if you turn. Reach!"

Reese did as he was told. He would not be able to see the man in time to out-shoot him if he made a play.

But suddenly he recognized that voice. He had forgotten that Dan Tolliver had been on his way to Sonora and it was Dan behind him with that cocked gun! The fellow, as moody and unpredictable as the other Tollivers were wild, had turned dangerous!

CHAPTER XIII

Tougher Than He Looks

YOUNG Dan Tolliver came from the brush, took Reese's guns, tossed them away. The CPA man slowly turned. Reese was shocked by Dan's appearance, for the young fellow had lost his boyish look. His eyes were bloodshot, his face haggard and dirty and unshaven. He looked as though he hadn't slept or eaten since taking the trail to Sonora.

Worse still, was his look of wildness. Somehow it seemed that the Tolliver blood had got the better of all that was good and decent in Dan.

"I figured you'd call it quits after you gave my warning to Sam Ames, Reese," he said harshly, "but I suppose a range detective is just a natural born snoop, and you can't change your nature!"

"Wait, Dan. I don't savvy."

"You're spying on the Tollivers!" snapped Dan.

"I don't deny that," Reese said, trying to keep a friendly tone. "I gave Sam your warning, but—"

"You keep on meddling in what's none of your business," Dan cut in. "I figured Sam would take his crew down to his Sonora ranch and guard his herd, and the Tolliver outfit would see that their scheme to run off those SA cattle was loco. But you couldn't let Matt Tolliver and Sam Ames settle their own feud."

"What makes you think they could settle it without bloodshed?"

"Matt would have backed down when he found out Sam was at the Ranch and had been warned. But nothing will satisfy you but to set a trap for the Tollivers."

Reese shook his head. "You're wrong, Dan. This is a bigger deal than you seem to know. Matt is your father, sure. I can understand how you feel about him. But he's in too deep to back down now, and he won't just because Sam Ames is down here ahead of him. And I'm not talking about the S A herd, either.

Dan stared at him. "What are you talking about, then?"

"Guns. Twelve hundred Winchester rifles."

"What have guns got to do with the Tollivers?" growled Dan.

Reese had guessed right. Dan knew that the Tolliver outfit intended to steal the S A herd, using the revolution to cover the theft, but he didn't know anything about his father's deal with Frank Stallman and *El Zurriago*.

"The revolutionists are hard up for arms," Reese said. "*El Zurriago* made a deal with Frank Stallman, who furnished guns, and in return he's to grab some Sonora mining properties owned by other Americans. Stallman arranged with Matt to smuggle the guns across the border."

"That's a lie!"

"Sorry, Dan, but it's the truth."

"I won't believe it! Nobody can make me believe it! My father hates Sam Ames because he believes Sam cheated him out of their partnership years ago! He wanted to get back at him by grabbing Sam's Sonora herd. He figures Sam Ames owes him a debt. He can be wrong, but he's an old man, and those old-timers bear a grudge until they work it off. He'll know he's whipped, once he finds out the S A crew is guarding the herd."

Reese was worried by Dan's blind loyalty and the desperation behind it. He said carefully,

"So you've been trying to catch up with

the Tolliver outfit. I thought you were trailing S A, but what you want is to be on hand when the two outfits meet, because you're not sure your father will back down. You've been prowling Smugglers' Trail, but you haven't caught sight of the Tolliver outfit. . . . Not until just now. . . Dan, how many pack animals would an outfit of that size take along on such a trip?"

"How should I know?" Dan asked sullenly.

"Four or five, at most?"

"What are you getting at, Reese?"

"There are thirty mules under pack with that Tolliver outfit," Reese told him. "They're carrying an almighty lot of grub, if it's grub in their packs." He shook his head. "Not grub—guns, Dan. See for yourself. Take my field glasses."

DAN drew his left hand over his tired eyes. The gesture showed his weariness. The gun in his right hand wavered, and the CPA man could have taken him, but instead Reese took the binoculars from the case, held them out. Dan shook his head.

"I'll take your word for it," he muttered dully. "What do you figure on doing about those guns?"

Reese looked him in the eyes. "What would you do, Dan?"

"They're my father and brothers first, smugglers second," Dan said. "I'm not forgetting that—ever."

"You know what those guns will be used for?"

"Sure. To kill off a lot of poor, dumb peons."

"You don't want that. I don't, either."

Dan shook his head, as if trying to clear uncertainty from his mind. He repeated flatly, demandingly:

"What are you going to do about it?"

Reese shrugged. "I wish I knew. I want to keep *El Zurriago* from getting hold of those guns. But the odds are against me. I've got two aides here on the desert with me, and there are some rurales—"

He broke off abruptly, seeing the quick change on Dan Tolliver's face.

"So you *are* setting a trap!" Dan said savagely, and lunged at the CPA man in a rush so swift there was no defense against it.

He struck with his gun. The first blow drove Reese to his knees, knocked off his hat. The second, striking his bare head, sprawled him on his face. There was one brief moment of terrible pain, then merciful unconsciousness. . . .

Steve Reese tried to rise, but couldn't make it. He was weak, shaky. His head throbbed with pain. His vision was blurred; a red-black mist quivered before his eyes. Unconsciously he groaned.

Attempting it again, Reese made it to his hands and knees. For moments he remained like that, waiting for his giddiness to pass. It was ironic. He had been badly gun-whipped by the only one he had considered harmless, of all those involved in this affair. Gritting his teeth, he heaved himself to his feet.

He stood swaying, looked about. He was alone.

Alarm came as he realized that his horse was gone. Dan Tolliver had taken it with him!

The pain in his head gradually eased to a dull ache. He ran an exploring hand over his head. There were two sore bumps, but no blood. He picked up his hat, dusted and re-shaped it, put it on, then retrieved his binoculars. His guns lay on the ground where Dan had tossed them. He went after the Colts, moving on shaky legs. His mouth felt cottony, and his lips were parched. He needed water badly. The blazing sun was oven-hot.

Climbing to a swell of sandy ground, he took out his field glasses, scanned the wasteland. Nothing. He must have been out cold for a long time. The Tolliver outfit had disappeared, and so had Dan.

As for Dusty and Hank . . . Reese could only think that they had come looking for him, but failed to see him lying in that tangle of brush and rocks. They were no doubt traveling south by now with the rurales, certain that he was somewhere ahead of them.

Reese was a man who refused to admit helplessness. But he was near it now, he realized, in a weakened condition, suffering from thirst, and afoot. In such circumstances a man had small chances for survival in the

desert. Heat drew the moisture from his body, and the dry air evaporated it so rapidly that only his growing weakness warned him of his dire need for water. Death in the desert could come swiftly.

Getting his bearings, Reese started in the direction of the waterhole. He started out none too strongly, and soon he was staggering.

But he made it after what seemed an eternity. He dropped flat at water's edge, drank sparingly, then ducked his head. His strength stopped ebbing abruptly, his mind cleared, and he fell back in the scant shade of a rock to rest. After a short time, he drank again, then returned to the shade.

The rock's shadow was rapidly lengthening. The sun was lowering. It was late afternoon.

He rolled and lighted a cigarette, tried to decide his next move while he smoked. He could make it out of the desert on foot now, he was sure. By traveling west, as the sun went down, he would be able to keep on going until he found a village. But that meant he would have failed in the mission that had brought him to the desert. He was reluctant to leave. Those guns—

THE sound of horsemen reached him, lifted him to his feet.

They were Mexicans, nine of them, rurales. They must be some of the detachment that had accosted the S A outfit on its way south, and they were led by a man who was familiar to Reese, the dapper Mexican with the scarred face who had been on the train to Valido—Juan Morales.

The riders stared at Reese in surprise as they halted to water their mounts. Morales recognized him at once.

"Senor Reese!" he exclaimed, as he dismounted. Striding forward, he offered his hand. "A strange place to meet you, *amigo mío.* What is happening?"

Reese told him briefly about his trip with the S A outfit and its encounter with the *El Zurriago* riders, about Frank Stallman's presence at the village to the south with a bunch of gunhands, and about his own spying upon the Tolliver outfit.

In turn Morales explained that he had been met at the Border by the rurales, and had been given Reese's message.

"You have seen these gun smugglers, then?" he asked.

"Some hours ago, heading south across the desert."

"Bueno!" Morales said confidently, "We will catch them now. But for you, *amigo,* they would have outwitted us. I learned in Valido that *El Zurriago* had been making secret visits to Senor Stallman, and could guess the reason. I expected the guns to be brought down here in his wagons, and so informed the Customs guards. But now thanks to you . . . You will go with us, Senor?"

"I've lost my horse."

"You and I, we will ride double."

"Well, thanks," said Reese.

"Por nada," Morales murmured.

The horses watered, the rurales mounted and headed south at a fast pace. They had traveled by a mile when one rider called out that he had caught sight of two riders and a spare horse in the distance, traveling slowly. Reese realized that Hank and Dusty were searching for him, after finding his horse which Dan Tolliver must have turned loose. He explained quickly, and the rurales swung toward the distant riders.

The relief of Dusty and Hank at seeing Steve Reese alive was tremendous.

"Doc, we thought you were a goner!" Dusty shouted.

"Yeah!" cried Hank. "When we found your bronc. The four rurales who were with us—we picked them up at Penasco—they wouldn't turn back to hunt for an *Americano,* though. They're trailing the Tolliver outfit."

Reese shifted to his own mount.

"We're riding with the rurales, boys," he said. "They'll need us if Matt Tolliver's outfit puts up a fight."

Hank grinned, seeing Dusty lighting a cigar.

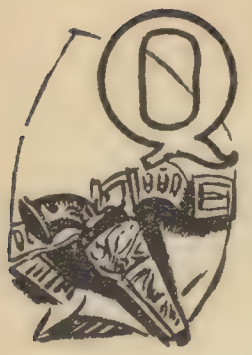
"Yeah, Doc! Dusty will help us smoke 'em out!"

The rurales were already on the move again.

The three CPA men swung in behind them.

CHAPTER XIV

Gun Smugglers



QUICKLY dusk thickened, and darkness came before the rurales and the CPA men sighted the smuggler outfit. However, one of the four Rurales who had been shadowing the Tolliver crowd loomed through the darkness. He had been riding to intercept his *compadres*. He made his report to Morales in Spanish too rapid for Reese to follow, but Morales interpreted.

"The smugglers are traveling southwest. They made a brief halt at sundown, but it seems now that they are heading for Aragon Plaza."

"That's a little town by the river?" Reese asked. "With a stone bridge across the river?"

"Si."

"That's where we saw *El Zurriago,"* the CPA man said. "And the Stallman crowd. If the smugglers reach there, we won't have a chance of grabbing those guns. We'll be outnumbered five to one."

Morales nodded gravely, then took a notebook and a pencil from his coat pocket. He wrote a message while one of his men held lighted matches so he could see. He gave the note to one of the rurales with orders to deliver it to a Lieutenant Mendoza. The courier swung away through the darkness, riding hard.

"With luck we shall be joined by friends," Morales said. He lighted a cigarette, and in the glow of the match his badly scarred face was grim. "But with or without help we must capture those rifles. We will ride hard, try to cut in ahead of the smugglers. If we must fight alone, it will be from ambush, so we have a fair chance."

Morales set a fast pace, and the stillness of the desert night was shattered by the hard drumming of hoofs.

After riding a few miles, they emerged from some low hills, and Morales called a halt. He sent one of his men along the road on a scout. The rurales lighted cigarettes and talked in low voices. Shortly the scout returned and reported that the smuggler band was on the road behind them and traveling fast. The rurales deadened their cigarettes, and Dusty Trail butted the stogie he had lighted. Rifles were pulled from saddle-boots. Morales drew his revolver, and ordered his men to take cover among the rocks and brush.

"Amigo," he said to Reese, "you and I will stay here."

Dusty and Hank withdrew with the Mexicans.

It was a perfect spot for an ambush. The smuggler outfit would be caught in the open, cut down by a withering fire before they could get their guns into play. Reese's face was somber.

"You'll give them a chance to surrender?" he asked Morales.

"Si," said Morales. "You and I will talk to them."

Soon they heard the clip-clop of many hoofs, and occasionally shouts as a rider urged the pack-mules to greater speed. Presently a long column of riders and laden-animals loomed through the darkness. The leader was well ahead of the outfit—a gaunt, bearded figure with a rifle across his saddle. Old Matt Tolliver.

"Hola, hombre!" Morales called out. "I want to talk to you, Senor Smuggler!"

Matt Tolliver jerked his horse to a stop. "Who're you?" he demanded. "Get out of our way. We're *El Zurriago's* riders!"

His outfit came on.

Morales muttered, *"Por Dios!* They ask for death!"

Reese drove his horse at Tolliver. "Listen, you fool!" he shouted. "You're heading into an ambush!"

Matt Tolliver wheeled, bellowed an order. The foremost riders pulled up, but the pack-string gave trouble. There was a wild mêlée of balky mules and cursing men.

Old Matt recognized Steve Reese now, glowered at him, growling an oath. His two elder sons rode up and sided him, glaring at the CPA man with hate-filled eyes.

"The game's up, Matt!" Reese shouted. "You've gambled—and lost! A dozen rurales are bushed up here. Give up before they start shooting!"

"He's bluffing!" Luke burst out.

Morales rode forward. "You are mistaken, senor. This is no *baza.* Listen!" He called out in Spanish, and from the darkness men answered one by one. "You see, senores? You will surrender or die!"

There was a brief moment when Steve Reese was sure the old rannihan would fight—and die. For Matt was gripped by indecision, and his two sons urged him to risk it. Then he shook his head, and shoulders sagged.

"I've played out my string," he mumbled and shoved his rifle back into the boot.

"What happens to us if we surrender?" he demanded flatly. "Do we get dobe-walled by your cussed rurales?"

REESE shot Morales an anxious look. Unless the rurale gave Matt Tolliver his word that there would be no firing squad for the smuggler band it would still become a bloody fight. But Morales also realized that and with *El Zurriago's* forces swarming over the country, he wasn't even in a position to take prisoners.

"I want the arms you've smuggled into Sonora, Senor Tolliver," Morales said, "Nothing more. Leave them in our hands and head back to the Border. Leave the pack-mules, senor and ride out."

Tolliver nodded heavily. "Fair enough."

He muttered some order to his sons. Luke and Jess started to argue, but Matt raged: "Do as I tell you!"

It was at that moment that one of the hidden rurales called a warning to Morales. Reese didn't hear what was said, but he saw the startled look on the Mexican's scarred face. The next moment he heard the drumming of hoofs. A bunch of riders—a big bunch by the sound—was coming from the direction of Aragon Plaza.

He glanced at Morales. "Your *compadre,* Mendoza?"

"No!" the rurale said. "I sent him word to join us at Aragon Plaza. These riders must be *El Zurriago's* men."

There was a jubilant shout from Luke Tolliver as he heard the oncoming riders. Luke's gun blazed, and Reese heard the shriek of the slug. Other guns roared among the ranks of the smuggler outfit.

The rurales held their fire calling to Morales for orders. There was a time to fight and a time to withdraw, and Juan Morales was too good at this game to gamble with certain defeat and death.

"Follow me, *amigo,*" he yelled, and wheeled his horse toward the brush and rocks in which his men were deployed.

Guns blasted at them as they retreated, but quickly the Tolliver outfit was on the move again. Safely behind cover, Reese watched the riders and pack-mules race along the road. He had a glimpse of Dan Tolliver, hatless, slumped in his saddle, near the end of the column. Dan's hands were bound to his saddle-horn, and a *vaquero* was leading his horse.

Morales had ordered his men to hold their fire, and not a shot was fired as the smuggler outfit was joined by a score of Mexican riders from Aragon Plaza.

Morales swore bitterly as the combined outfits moved on south. Then, checking his anger, he said:

"There is still a chance. Lieutenant Mendoza has a detail of cavalrymen, and if he arrives at the Plaza in time . . . Come! We will follow!"

They headed in the direction of Aragon Plaza but, fearing an ambush by *El Zurriago* riders, they struck across open country. Morales sent one of his rurales ahead at a hard gallop in an attempt to contact Lieutenant Mendoza's command, grasping at the slim hope that Mendoza had managed to steer clear of traps set for him by the revolutionists. He explained to Steve Reese that the lieutenant had orders to act with the rurales in the attempt to seize the smuggled arms.

As the rurales and CPA men rode through the night, they drew farther and farther away from the smuggler outfit. At last, topping a rise of ground west of the river, they saw the lights of Aragon Plaza. Morales courier returned as they halted there to rest their mounts, reporting that Mendoza and

his cavalry were nearing the bridge and would attempt to seize it.

"Bueno!" cried Morales.

The rurales again took their rifles from their saddles, and Reese knew by their grimness that this time they would not dodge a fight.

Such was the turbulent history of Sonora that the battle of Aragon Plaza was shrugged off by natives almost as soon as the gunsmoke cleared, as merely a fight between *los rurales y los bandidos*. Such simple peons looked only to tomorrow. A revolution, for them, was no more than a passing incident.

But for Steve Reese the fight at the bridge and in the town was a high spot in his career, something to marvel at, since it had come about through so small a thing as his investigation of a single stolen cow.

One man's part in that battle was but a microscopic part of the whole, and the complete action hazy, blurred by darkness and gunsmoke and confusion. But Reese knew that Lieutenant Mendoza with twenty Federal cavalrymen seized the stone bridge over the river no more than a moment before the revolutionist-escorted smuggler outfit approached it by way of the road. Mendoza promptly ordered his men to open fire. And *El Zurriago's* riders galloped forward, charging the bridge ahead of the smuggler outfit.

MORALES led the rurales and the CPA men down from the rise, to strike on the revolutionists' flank. But *El Zurriago* himself was still in town, and he struck at the cavalrymen's rear with more of his men, and with the help of Frank Stallman and his American gunhands. The soldiers were trapped and might have been wiped out if the revolutionists on the west side of the river had not broken off their attack to fire on the rurales plunging onward as reinforcements.

Reese's guns blazed as his gray, its reins looped over the saddle horn, raced along with his *compadres*. Men shouted, cursed. The wounded screamed. A rurale to Reese's right toppled from his mount, and another

[*Turn page*]

"HE'S GOT LADDIE BOY in check all right, but not Dry Scalp. My, what unkempt hair! Looks like a mane . . . and I'll bet it's as hard to comb. Loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"

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to his left, badly hit, swerved away.

Morales led his band in among a scattering of boulders, ordered them to dismount. Reese shared a rock with him, and swiftly brought his rifle into play. Morales' men raked the riders on the road with a deadly fire, but now the Tolliver crowd had come up, and they had joined in the fight. The pack mules had come to a halt in a bunch and, in the way of such animals, seemed unconcerned about the shooting. But horses balked and reared and plunged, many of them now riderless.

Morales was muttering to himself in Spanish, and his scarred face was bleak. His plans had misfired from start to finish, and he feared that the battle would end in a fiasco for his rurales and Mendoza's cavalry. The soldiers were fighting determinedly, but without hope. They were trapped, and the heavy fire from the Plaza was decimating their ranks.

Some of the Stallman crowd now were sniping at the rurales from behind cover on the east bank of the river. Morales groaned as another of his men crumpled to the ground. He glanced at Reese while reloading his revolver, and said thickly,

"*Amigo,* we may die here. But this is not your cause that we die for. Take your *compadres* and go. Save yourselves."

Reese paused, too, to reload. The barrel of his rifle was hot.

"I've got an idea, Morales," he said. "If *El Zurriago* and Stallman were attacked from behind, from the Plaza—"

"But who would do the attacking, *amigo mio?*"

"I said I've got an idea," Reese replied.

He withdrew through the boulders, caught up his horse. Once he was mounted he became a target for the snipers on the opposite bank of the river. But his luck held, and he galloped away with slugs probing the darkness for him. He swung south along the stream until he was close to the S A camp. He hailed the cow outfit as he put his mount into the water.

"That you, Reese?" Sam Ames yelled.

"Yeah! Hold your fire!"

Ames and his cowhands were ringing the camp with their guns, determined to shoot if the fighting should come their way. Reese had a glimpse of Sherry. The girl stood near the chuckwagon, holding her pinto by the reins, ready to ride, if need be. Ames hurried to Reese as he climbed from the river.

"What's happened?" he demanded. "It sounds like the whole revolution is being fought right here."

"That's about it," Reese said hastily. "*El Zurriago* is in the village, and if he could be killed or captured his revolution would end here. But he's outnumbering the soldiers and rurales. There's one chance of their whipping him, Sam. You willing to lend a hand?"

"Sure," the rancher replied. "I own a ranch here in Sonora. I owe the country something, I reckon. You want me to lead my crew into the village and jump them hombres from the rear?"

"No—that's too risky," Reese told him. "But if you'd be willing to drive your herd there, and stampede it, it might give the soldiers and rurales the chance they need. You'll lose your cattle anyway, Sam, because Matt Tolliver got through with those guns!"

CHAPTER XV

Stampede Reinforcements

NO NEED for Sam Ames to be urged! He turned to his crew, shouted orders, and the men ran to their saddled horses. Reese rode out to the great herd with them. The cattle were already restless, due to the racketing gunfire.

The S A crew rode in on them, yelling and shooting, and the cattle began to move. Scattered bunches quickly drifted together, and presently those three thousand cattle were moving at full stampede—a vast Juggernaut that nothing could stop!

The sound of pounding hoofs and clashing

horns was a swelling thunder. Reese rode on the right flank of the stampede, hoping that the gunfire had driven the villagers off the streets of Aragon Plaza. The herd poured into the little dobe village like a tidal wave, swarming through the streets. Aragon Plaza was engulfed by the frenzied horde.

Men with the courage to face flaming guns knew only terror when confronted by such a wild charge, and frantic screams rose as *El Zurriago's* men and Stallman's gunhands became aware of the danger. Most were afoot, and they took flight, some throwing away their weapons in their panic. The few who were mounted tried to outrun the stampede.

Reese shuddered as he saw men go down under the wave of cattle. The herd swept on toward the river bank, and the snipers there took to the water where the rurales' guns cut them down. Reese loped into the village, followed by Sam Ames and his rider. They had their guns ready, but had few targets. Gaining the plaza Reese saw two riders emerge from the dark alley alongside the *cantina.* One was mounted on a white horse —Captain Diego. The other was a bulky man in a gaudy uniform—*El Zurriago.*

It was always the same, Reese thought bitterly. Little men fought and died while men responsible for the bloodshed remained behind the lines and fled when defeat came. Anger gripped him, and he charged across the plaza to head off the fleeing pair.

Diego cursed, fired at him. The CPA man's Colt blasted, and Diego cried out as he was knocked from his galloping white horse. The wily *El Zurriago* threw away his gun, no doubt hoping that this gringo would not shoot him in cold-blood. And hoping too, perhaps, that his fine sorrel would outrun the *Americano's* gray cow pony.

El Zurriago was right. Steve Reese didn't shoot him, and his sorrel was faster than the CPA man's gray. But *El Zurriago* turned into a narrow street that was half blocked by a *carreta,* and half by some S A cattle that had strayed from the herd. Reese was close enough, as the man tried to force his horse through the bunch of cattle, to make a throw with his rope.

The loop caught *El Zurriago* just as the sorrel plunged through the milling cattle. The rope jerked him from saddle. The bulky revolutionist landed so hard all fight was jolted out of him.

Behind Reese, over by the bridge, the fighting had let up except for an occasional gunshot. . . .

It was gray dawn when the horror was finally ended. In the growing light the dead and wounded could be seen sprawled upon and about the bridge. The S A cattle had scattered far and wide. But a handful of calvarymen who were still alive took charge of *El Zurriago.* Five rurales survived, beside Juan Morales, and they stood guard over a few prisoners and over the arms-laden pack mules.

El Zurriago's followers who had survived were in flight—back to their farms and *ranchos* and villages. They would spread the word of the defeat and the capture of their leader who no doubt would end up before a firing squad. That was the price *El Zurriago's* kind always had to pay for failure.

Amid the shambles old Matt Tolliver lay dying, three bullet-holes in him. All three of his sons were prisoners. Luke and Jess had elected to stay with their father, and Dan, their captive, had been unable to leave. Some of the Tolliver crew were dead. The remainder were in wild flight back toward the Border with the remnants of Frank Stallman's band.

Dusty Trail and Hank Ball were unharmed. With Reese, they watched Sam Ames stop beside the dying Matt Tolliver. Matt had asked to see his old enemy. He said, his voice a husky whisper, instead of his harsh bellow,

"Sam, old pardner, I'm dyin' and the feud is dyin' with me. I've told my sons to bury it with me. I lived with hate, but I ain't aimin' to die with it eatin' at my innards. Sam—"

FOR A moment it seemed that he had slipped away from the living. But he rallied briefly, long enough to whisper,

"Dan is the best of the Tollivers, because he ain't like me. He tried to turn me back with them guns, but I wouldn't pay him no heed. If your daughter marries my boy Dan, she'll have a good man to—"

The whispering voice failed. Wild Matt Tolliver was tamed at last.

Morales turned away with Steve Reese. His scarred face was saddened.

"All this for nothing," he muttered. "So many dead."

"What about the prisoners, Juan?" the CPA man asked.

Morales shrugged. "Should they be punished? I do not know. Most are Americans. Maybe they are no more to blame than the peons who were duped by *El Zurriago*." He shook his head, tired and bewildered. "*El Zurriago* will be punished. The old man is dead. With Frank Stallman, they alone are to blame."

Reese nodded. This rurale might be tough, but he had a heart. "I blame Stallman more than *El Zurriago*—and far more than Matt Tolliver," he said grimly. "His kind are the evil ones of this world, Juan. The greedy ones. Without his support, it's likely that *El Zurriago* wouldn't have dared to start this revolution. It's too bad he got away."

"I am not sure he got away," Morales replied. "He was with the snipers on the river bank. When the stampede came the snipers jumped into the river, and my men shot them down. Only one escaped. He fled downstream like a *loco hombre*. Maybe it was Stallman, but the chances are he is lying dead in the water."

Reese rolled a cigarette, his bronzed face thoughtful. As Morales moved away, Dan Tolliver walked slowly toward Reese. He had been with his father at the end, with his brothers.

His grief was as great as that of Luke and Jess.

"Reese," he said thickly, "I played the fool when I gun-whipped you and left you on the desert. But I was out of my head. Crazy. I wanted to save my father and brothers. I tried to get them to turn back with the guns, but they wouldn't listen. I'm sorry, Reese, that—"

The CPA man was listening with only half his mind. He was thinking about what Morales had said about one of the Stallman crowd having escaped down river.

And he felt sure the man had been Stallman.

He gripped Dan's arm.

"Forget the past," he said, "and look to the future. With a girl like Sherry Ames waiting for you, yours is a future any man would envy."

He turned away abruptly, throwing down his cigarette, catching up his horse. He mounted and lifted the gray to a lope. It was not just hatred for Frank Stallman that caused him to hurry. It was fear—fear for Sherry Ames.

He crossed the bridge where the dead cavalrymen lay sprawled, and where villagers were gathering. As he turned toward the broad grass flat beyond Aragon Plaza, the eastern sky was pink and gold with dawn.

It was an hour since the stampede had turned the tide of battle. Stallman had had that much time. If it had been Stallman—and Reese was more and more certain he was the man who had escaped—he would have concealed himself in the brush, waiting to make sure there was no pursuit. Then he would have wanted to get a mount. The nearest horses were at the cow outfit's camp, and Sherry was alone there except for old Miguel, the cook. Reese's gray was tired, but Reese urged it on. Before long he saw the chuckwagon, and the remuda in the rope corral.

And a man saddling an S A horse. A man who was not Miguel.

The cook lay on the ground, badly beaten, and Sherry was kneeling beside him. The man saddling the horse looked around as Reese approached, then leaped to the girl and held her as a shield. He held the struggling Sherry with his left arm, held a cocked gun in his right hand. He was hatless, wet and muddy from head to foot, and had the wild look that desperation gives a man.

It was Frank Stallman—turned brute.

Reese reined in, a rocky look on his face, and one of his Colts drawn. "Turn her loose, Stallman," he said harshly.

"You take me for a fool, Reese?" Stallman demanded. Sherry had stopped struggling. "I'm gambling for my life," he yelled. "It's my life or the girl's, Reese. You make the choice!"

THE CPA man realized that he was dealing with a man crazed by panic. Stallman certainly would kill Sherry if he was frightened farther. "All right, you win," Reese said. "Finish saddling and ride out."

Stallman laughed hollowly. "And get shot down? I told you I'm no fool. Get off your horse, and turn your back."

Reese thought, And get shot in the back? But he must take the risk. Stallman had his gun pressed against Sherry's side. Her face was pale, her eyes full of fear.

"You won't get far, Stallman," Reese said. "A dozen men will be after you at the sound of a shot."

He dismounted, turned his back to the man. "Mr. Reese!" Sherry cried.

Reese whirled. The girl's submission had been pretense. She had caught Stallman's wrist, had managed to force the gun away from her body, and was putting up a fierce fight to keep the gun from again pointing at her.

Miguel was crawling toward the struggling pair. The battered Mexican wrapped his arms about Stallman's legs as Reese ran forward.

Cursing, Stallman struck the girl a vicious blow, knocking her to the ground, drove a heel into Miguel's face—and broke free.

His gun roared at Reese, but in his wildness he failed to take aim. The CPA man gave him no second shot. His Colt blasted. Stallman staggered, but tried to bring his gun to bear on the tall, bronzed avenger striding toward him. Reese fired again, and this time Stallman went down. The man was dead.

Riders came pounding up as Reese looked to Sherry and Miguel. The girl was dazed, but not seriously hurt. The Mexican would be a long time recovering from the gun-whipping and the kick Stallman had given him, but he managed to grin and say:

"He was one bad hombre. But we took care of him, eh?"

"We sure did, *amigo,*" Reese said, returning the smile.

When he looked around, the S A crew was dismounting. Dan Tolliver was with them, and he and Sam Ames ran to Sherry. Juan Morales rode up, dismounted, and stared down at Frank Stallman's body. When he looked at Reese, a smile was on his scarred face.

"Gracias, amigo," he murmured.

"Por nada," Reese said, with a smile of his own. . . .

They rode north, Steve Reese and his two fellow CPA investigators. They traveled the road that led to the Border and on to Valido. The land was quiet, at peace. The villages and the *ranchos* had their men back, except for those who had died. There was grieving, but the sorrow was hidden. And the people who watched the three *Yanquis* pass were fortunate, for they would not suffer the lash of the Whip.

"And to think we set out to get back a stolen cow," Dusty Trail said, in an awed voice.

Hank Ball winked at Reese.

"Dusty better not tell anybody about it," he said. "He'd be accused of havin' pipe-dreams."

"Listen, Redhead," Dusty muttered around his black stogie. "I never smoked a pipe in my life. When I can't afford good seegars—"

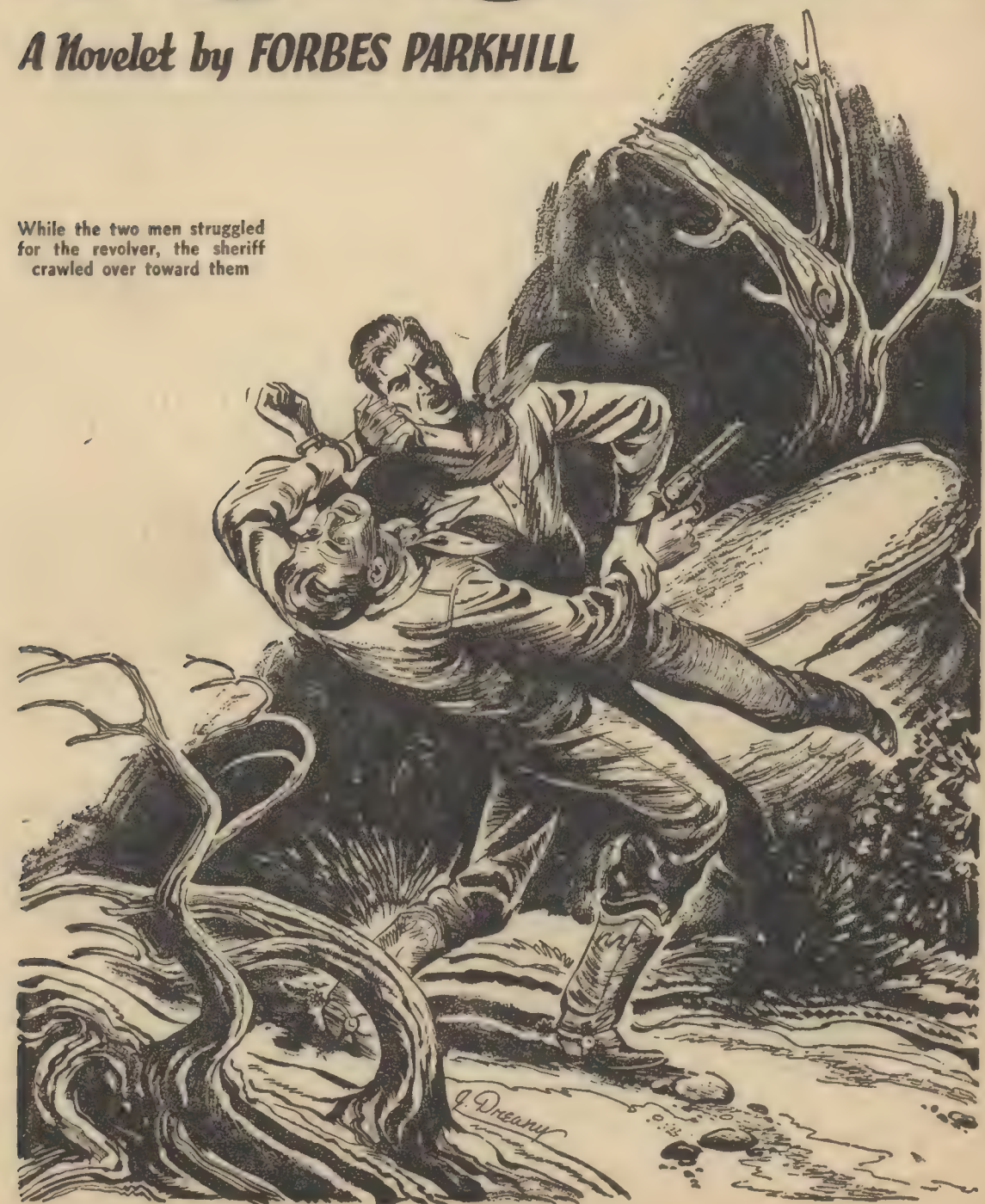
Steve Reese didn't listen to their banter.

He was imagining Colonel Beauvine's astonishment when he reached CPA headquarters and made his report. The colonel might think he was stretching it a bit. After all, it had been only a single cow that had been stolen. It was fortunate, Reese reflected, that he had a reputation for truthfulness and courage. For these were the qualities that would continue to serve him in good stead wherever harassed men needed help in fighting evil and injustice.

***Next Issue:* Muleshoe Marauders, *an Exciting Steve Reese Novel by* D. B. Newton**

GUNS Before

A Novelet by FORBES PARKHILL



While the two men struggled for the revolver, the sheriff crawled over toward them

Dawn

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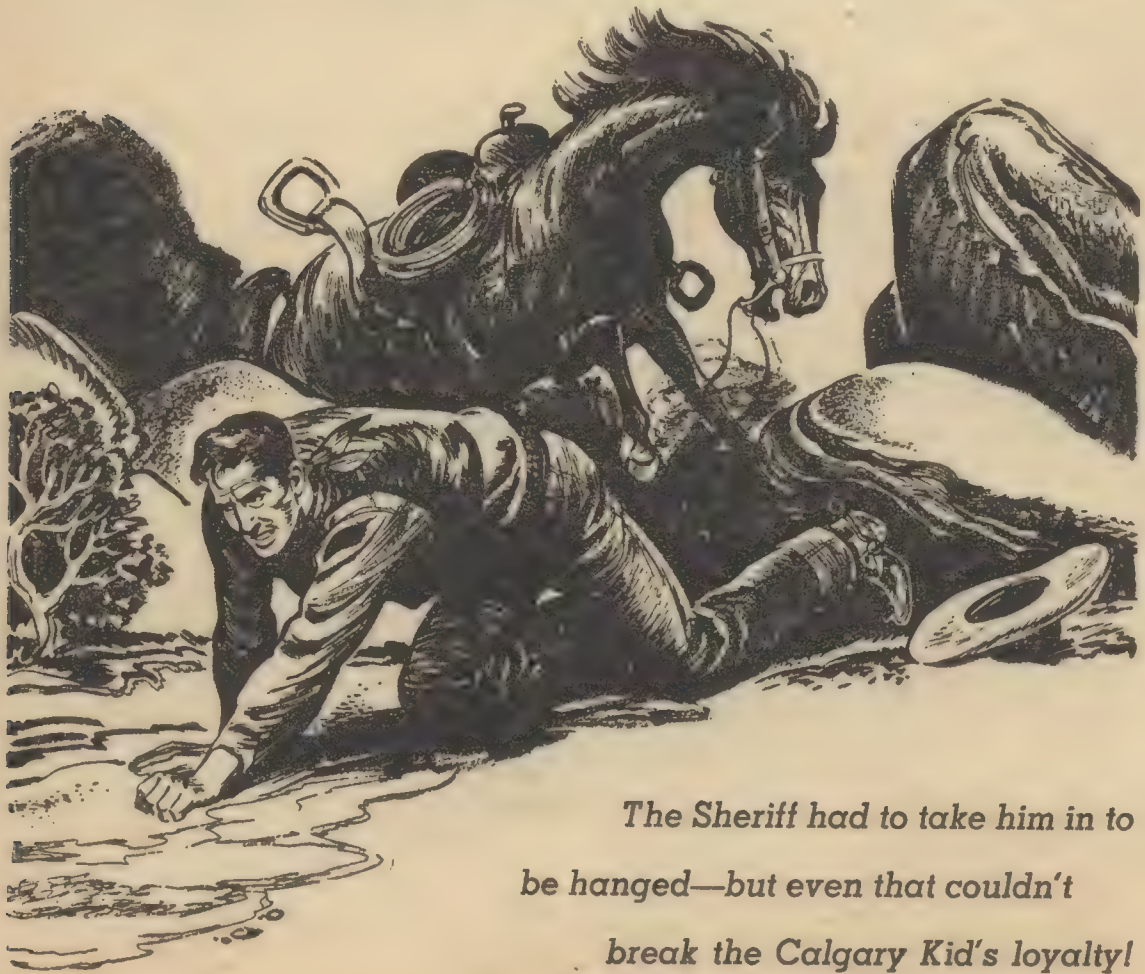
CHAPTER I

Judge Colt vs. John Law

THE first furious outburst of gunfire in the dusty, moonlit main street of Mustang brought the Calgary Kid leaping from his bunk to grip the bars of his cell window so tightly his knuckles showed white. His lean, freckled face and blue eyes suddenly lighted up with hope. The first time the nineteen-year-old Kid had dared hope since he had heard the judge sentence him to die on the gallows.

"A jail delivery!" was the glad cry that burst spontaneously from his lips. "Some of the boys are fixing to pry me out!"

In the adjoining cell another prisoner leaped to the grilled window at the crackling burst of .45 reports. Elko Aguilar, con-



The Sheriff had to take him in to be hanged—but even that couldn't break the Calgary Kid's loyalty!

victed rustler; darker, slighter and somewhat older than the Kid. Plainly he, too, cherished the hope that the attack meant immediate freedom for him.

"Me, I'll be outa here in two shakes of a pigging string!" he cried thickly. "They're going to peel the jail off'n me and bust me loose!"

The bedlam of yelling and shooting brought a third person within the jail bounding to a window. Sheriff "Pesky" Henwood; young, but not so young as the Kid; handsome, fearless, and noted for his unswerving devotion to duty. He reached for his Colt, but thrust it back in its holster as he reached the window.

"What's the ruckus about, boys?" he called easily. "It's several months late to celebrate the Fourth."

The shooting and the whooping subsided. The Kid, peering through the bars of his window, could see the shadowy group clustered in the blackness beneath the cottonwoods. The gloom was too dense to recognize anyone, although the moonlight made the intervening space almost bright as day.

"You savvy daggone well, Sheriff!" called a disguised voice from the shadows. "We want your lousy prisoner, and we want him right now!"

The Kid's heart leaped. Freedom! Life—when he had thought all hope lost! Escape from the spectre of the gallows that had haunted his thoughts.

"Shore, now," drawled Sheriff Henwood, "my jail happens to be plumb populous right at present. Which of my two prisoners d'yuh crave, boys?"

"Both!" was the ominous, snarling answer.

"Shore, now," bantered the sheriff, "I'd hate to part with 'em. You see, I sorta aim to take 'em both to the State Penitentiary tomorrow."

The Kid's breath caught in his throat. He had known the sheriff ever since Pesky had been foreman of the KY, and the Kid had been working at his first man-size job. And he knew he wouldn't bluff worth a 'dobe dollar; knew he'd go down fighting, riddled with bullets, rather than give up a prisoner.

"Goshamighty!" gasped the broad-shouldered, freckled youth as he gripped the bars. "I shore hope they can get me outa here without killing the sheriff! He's treated me white!"

An angry mutter arose from the crowd.

"We want them prisoners!" the spokesman shouted. "We're going to have 'em if we have to tear your one-hoss jail apart. Git wise, Sheriff—and stay alive!"

"Shucks, boys," countered Sheriff Henwood, "don't go off half-cocked and tackle something you can't get away with—something you're sure to be sorry for. Run along home, now, and—"

"Not until we string up the gunman that murdered Waterdog Banigan!" A bloodthirsty roar went up. "We aim to hang the Calgary Kid!"

The blood froze in the Kid's veins. Hang him? Why, he had supposed they were there to rescue him! His sudden surging hope was transformed into black despair.

"Would you mind," Sheriff Henwood cried, "tellin' me what's the big idea of wantin' to hang a gent that's already been sentenced to be hanged official two weeks from today?"

"Because everybody knows he'll never see the inside of the penitentiary!" snarled the spokesman. "Him and you was friends when you worked together on the KY! You been waiting to help him escape, Pesky!"

"Listen!" bellowed the sheriff, his voice trembling with anger. "The Calgary Kid was my friend, and still is! But that don't make no difference. I got my duty to do and I'll do it! I'll deliver him safe at the penitentiary tomorrow, or know the reason why!"

SOMEONE in the mob laughed harshly. "Then you'll deliver his dead carcass, Sheriff! In half an hour the Calgary Kid will be just a hunk of cold meat, swinging from yon cottonwood limb!"

A feeling of helplessness gripped the listening prisoner. He had faced hot lead in many a gun-to-gun battle. The prospect of going down fighting with a blazing gun in his hand was not bad. But to be dragged out of his cell, helpless, to be strung up to a tree limb was a destiny that curdled the blood in his veins.

"Boys," called the sheriff, "you all know

me. Some of you have called me a hog for duty. Anyways, I don't think there's a gent on this range who can say I ever broke my word. I promise you I'll deliver both these prisoners safe at the Big House tomorrow."

"They's a first time for everything, including busted promises," came the sneering reply. "If it's a toss-up between sending one of your best friends to his death and blinking at your bounden duty, we believe you'll decide in favor of the friend. We'll give you to the count of twenty to turn them prisoners over!"

Pesky raised a silencing hand as the spokesman began to count.

"Listen, boys! The Calgary Kid's my friend. But he's guilty of murder. I'd never of nabbed him if I hadn't believed him guilty. If I'd been of a mind to favor him, that's when I'd of let him get away!"

"—seven-eight-nine—" counted the leader.

"And what d'you aim to do with Elko Aguilar?" demanded the sheriff. "You ain't fixing to hang him, too! You're going to try to turn him loose! I spotted your voice, Pintail Joe! You're manager of Elko's Moccasin ranch, you aim to spring your boss—"

"sixteen-seventeen-eighteen—"

"If you're loco enough to think you can take my prisoners away from me, you're welcome to try!" Sheriff Henwood shouted as he reached for his gun. "But a dozen of you are likely to die doing it."

"—twenty!" came the voice of Pintail. A wild whoop broke from the throng. Six-guns cut loose, the flame from their muzzles stabbing the shadows beneath the cottonwoods.

The Calgary Kid, still crouching at the barred window, saw the mob break toward the jail, stampeding across the moonlit space. One in the front rank stumbled and went down under Sheriff Pesky Henwood's fire. The dusty street was a bedlam of noise again.

Elko Aguilar yelled gleeful words of encouragement. The Kid's heart sank. He knew the jail was too flimsy to withstand a determined assault. Pesky Henwood was a courageous fighter, but one man couldn't outfight fifty.

"Pesky!" he called out at the top of his voice. "Bring me a gun! I'll help you fight 'em off!"

But the pandemonium of crackling guns and yelling men drowned out his shout. Another raider was dropped by the sheriff's fire. A bullet splintered through the window casing. A stinging sliver buried itself in the flesh of the Kid's cheek. Instinct made him leap back, although he'd rather have stopped a .45 slug than die at the end of a rope.

"In two shakes of a pigging string," Elko called, "you'll be waltzing on air and I'll be free!"

The Calgary Kid heard a fresh burst of gunfire. He leaped to the window again. A second group of raiders was emerging from the scattered willows. They were shooting as they came.

This second assault was plainly part of a prearranged plan. The first attack was to keep the sheriff engaged while the second group cracked the jail.

"Pesky can't possibly fight 'em off from both sides at once!" gasped the Kid. "There ain't a chance in a million for me less'n he gives me a gun!"

CHAPTER II

Battle Royal

HIS warning shout went unanswered. Bullets came zinging through the barred window. The Kid would have given his life to feel the kick of a lead-belching six-slinger in his hand.

Then Pesky must have heard his cries. For the door from the sheriff's office swung open, and the officer darted into the cell room. He sped to an opposite window, beyond the Kid's cell, stuffing fresh shells into the chamber of his hot .45 as he ran.

"Give me a gun, Pesky!" the Kid shrieked above the clamor of the bloodthirsty voices and the crashing of gunfire. "Give me a .45 and we'll fight 'em off together!"

But Sheriff Henwood shook his head. He crouched by the rear window, sending shot after shot toward the group charging the jail.

Then the Calgary Kid heard a terrific smash from the front of the jail. He yelled frantically:

"They're batterin' down the door with a log, Pesky! Goshamighty, man, if you'll only give me a gun—"

Another resounding smash drowned his words. The sheriff spun about, started toward him. Hope surged anew. His hand was trembling with eagerness as he reached through the bars of his cell for the weapon. "This is the only gun I got," Sheriff Henwood panted, "and I wouldn't arm a prisoner! There's guns in my office, but it's too late to get 'em!"

With an ear-splitting crash the outer door went down.

"I'll handcuff the two of us together," gasped the sheriff, "so's they can't take you without killing me! I'll handcuff us so one is on each side of the cell bars, and they can't take you outside to hang you! Stick your hand through the bars. Be quick about it!"

The Kid thrust his left hand through the steel grill. Sheriff Henwood whisked the handcuffs from his pocket, jerking with it a bunch of keys, which fell to the floor. The Kid felt the cold steel close about his wrist.

The sheriff had to shove his six-gun back in its holster before he could close the other cuff on his own wrist. A bullet from outside struck a bar of the window, ricocheted and clipped him a glancing blow on the head.

He staggered backward, crashed against the outer wall and slowly slid to the floor, senseless, just as the Kid heard an ominous rush of feet in the sheriff's office. Pesky Henwood had passed out of the picture at the instant he had been about to put into effect his desperate plan to save his prisoner's life.

The Kid stared at the handcuff dangling from his wrist. He thought the sheriff had been killed. He dropped to the floor and stretched his arms between the bars, striving to reach the six-gun protruding from the holster of the fallen officer. He failed to touch it by inches.

He snatched up the fallen keys, hoping against hope that he might unlock the cell door and slip away to freedom. But as he leaped to his feet the mob burst in.

"Don't shoot him, boys!" shrieked Pintail Joe. "Save him for the rope! We got everything our own way, now!"

A bloodthirsty howl went up. Pintail shook the cell door. It was locked. He shouted to his men to search the sheriff's office for the keys. But they pushed forward with the battering ram.

"Gangway! We'll smash down the door!"

The Calgary Kid knew how a trapped coyote must feel as it watches the approach of the trapper prepared to club it to death. He crouched, helpless, watching the men who craved his life.

The ram crashed into the door. As it sprung open the raiders poured into the cell, yelling.

THE KID leaped forward, fighting with the desperation of a cornered badger. He swung the loose handcuff at the face of the first man. He had no hope of fighting free. His one wish was to so anger his enemies that they would shoot him. A bullet death was swift and sweet.

As the loose handcuff smashed into the first man's face, he staggered forward, gun upraised, ready to slash down on the prisoner's skull.

The Kid tore into his foes with the fury of a wildcat. He flung the first man violently aside and sent a fist crashing into the face of the next. He knocked one cold with an upward clip to the jaw.

A descending pistol muzzle glanced off the Kid's brow. Blood trickled down his forehead into his eyes. He was almost blinded by a red haze as he drove into the raiders, his fists working like pistons.

Four men had succeeded in gaining entrance to his cell—and all four were sprawling on the floor, one senseless. Another scrambled to his feet and waited a chance to spring on the Kid from behind.

Pintail Joe raised his gun.

"Surrender, or I'll shoot!" he bellowed.

But the battling Kid was hoping he would shoot. As he drew back his left hand for a tremendous swing the crouching raider saw his chance. He reached out and grabbed the handcuff that swung wildly from the prisoner's wrist.

The force of the Kid's own blow swung him halfway around. He staggered, his free arm windmilling wildly. Another jerk on

the handcuffs sent him spiraling into the mass pressing through the cell door.

A fist smashed into his mouth. A long pair of arms encircled his waist. One of the fallen men grabbed his legs and squeezed his ankles together. The Kid swung with his free fist. He felt teeth splinter under his knuckles.

Then he went down, fighting like a tornado, overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers. A howl of triumph arose from the throats of his captors.

"Okay, boys—lug him outside!" snapped Pintail Joe. "Then smash down the door of Elko's cell. Man, I'll tell the world this killer's some scrapper!"

The raiders piled off the prisoner. The man who held the other end of the handcuffs tried to jerk him to his feet.

But the Kid refused to walk. He wrenched and twisted and as they tried to drag him through the door he dropped to the floor and braced his feet.

Half a dozen sought to pick him up. But it was not easy to carry a man twisting, squirming and kicking with desperation born of approaching death. It was minutes before they could slide him through the door of the cell. He was as easy to hold as a greased sidewinder. He struggled furiously every moment while they lugged him through the sheriff's office and to the shadow of a tree on the edge of the creek.

The Kid wasn't the kind to quit, even though his chances were a million to one. But all he hoped to gain was a quick and merciful death.

Pintail Joe thrust a gun into Elko Aguilar's hand. Lacking a cartridge belt, Elko thrust the weapon inside the waistband of his trousers and followed the lynching party.

"I got a good hoss waiting for you," Pintail explained hurriedly. "It won't take you long to slide acrost the Border, Elko."

Someone tossed a rope over a limb above the Calgary Kid. The noose was dropped lightly over his head and permitted to lie loosely on his shoulders.

"Kid," said Pintail Joe harshly, "you always denied you killed Waterdog Banigan. I reckon you don't wanta go with a lie on your lips. Don't you figger you better confess?"

"Go take a jump in the crik!" the Kid cried defiantly, through torn and bleeding lips.

"Just a second, Pintail," put in Elko nervously. "The sheriff ain't dead. You better lock him up in a cell."

"We couldn't find the keys," frowned Pintail. "Leave loose of his hands, boys, and tighten the rope. He can't git away now."

"The Kid's got the keys in his pocket," said Elko. "I seen him grab 'em. Wait—I'll get 'em!"

He stepped up to the Kid, who had calmed down as the noose tightened, and reached for Calgary's pocket.

There was a flash of moonlight on polished steel and a tiny click of metal against metal. Elko leaped lack with an oath. Cries of amazement rose from the crowd as they saw that Elko and the Kid were handcuffed together!

CHAPTER III

Out of the Frying Pan

SLIPPING his free hand in his pocket, the Calgary Kid drew forth the bunch of keys. For a moment he held them aloft. Then he cast them far out into the swift waters of the creek.

"Well, gents," he cried, grinning, "the joke's on you, I reckon. Me and Elko are chained together, and the key's lost, permanent. You can't hang me as long as we're handcuffed, and you can't set him free, either. You dasn't even shoot me, or you'll be leaving your friend chained to my corpse!"

The chorus of cries was followed by an instant of stunned silence. Elko broke it with an enraged oath.

"We can't let him get away with this, boys! There must be other keys in the sheriff's office! Hurry up and look, somebody!"

"What are you aiming to do, Kid?" gulped the dumbfounded Pintail Joe.

The Calgary Kid drew a deep breath of relief. But he knew he wasn't out of the woods yet.

"This!" answered the Kid, and suddenly snatched the revolver from Elko's waistband. He turned it on the flabbergasted lynching party. He didn't even trouble to back against the cottonwood tree. No one dared shoot him from behind and leave Elko chained to his body. "I aim, gents, to shove a heap of distance between here and me. You don't suppose I'm goin' to sashay back into jail and let the sheriff take me to the pen to be hanged, do you? I want to thank you boys. I shore appreciate your thoughtfulness!"

A dozen guns were trained upon him. But none would shoot so long as he was shackled to Elko. The moving spirits in the lynching party were from the Moccasin ranch, which long had been operated as a blind for the rustling operations of Elko, Pintail and their henchmen. They had succeeded in enlisting the aid of a few of the townsmen for their proposed neckwear soiree. But the raid on the jail had been to rescue Elko as well as lynch the Kid.

The Kid knew his safety depended on getting away before they found another key to the handcuffs. He didn't know whether they'd find a duplicate in the sheriff's office, but he was afraid they would. His guns swung on the group that held the free end of the rope.

"Loosen up on my four-in-hand, gents!" he snapped.

They hesitated. The Kid's gun roared. A bullet thudded into the ground in their midst. They dropped the rope as if it were a red-hot wire.

The Kid laughed. He started backing away. The noose was still about his neck, the free end dragging over the tree limb. The bewildered Elko cursed and hung back. The Kid slammed him on the side of the head with the flat of his gun not hard enough to knock him out, but hard enough to jar the fear of Judge Colt into him.

"Stop him, boys!" Elko pleaded frantically. "Don't let him get away with this!"

Pintail Joe leaped forward. Again the Kid's captured six-gun blazed. The bullet seared across Pintail's ribs. The sudden streak of pain took all the sap out of him.

"Next time," the Kid announced, "I'll shoot to kill! I'm already sentenced to hang, and no matter how many I kill, they can't hang me any higher or harder or longer! If you think I'm bluffing, just try to call me!"

ELKO was following him reluctantly, cursing blue holes in the air, but helpless. In his haste, the Kid had snapped the cuff about Elko's left wrist. So the two were not shackled together, left wrist to right. Elko's left wrist was fastened to the Kid's left.

"Hold him back, Elko!" Pintail cried to the convicted rustler. "Bear down on him! We'll find the other key!"

Elko dropped to the ground. "I'm not going to step farther, you dashety-blanked son of a blinkety-bang!"

"No?" ironically asked the Kid, who was at least twenty pounds heavier than the rustler.

He grabbed the link chain of the handcuffs with his left hand to ease the strain. Then he began jerking Elko violently, dragging him over the rocks in a series of terrific yanks that hurt the rustler cruelly. He finally staggered to his feet, grimacing with pain, followed meekly as the Kid backed toward the ground-hitched horses.

"Hit the leather!" the Kid ordered as he selected the best mount in the group. But Elko hung back, evidently stalling for time. The Kid tore into him savagely, kicking him unmercifully, belting him alongside the head with the gun. Elko changed his mind speedily, was in the saddle. The Kid swung up behind him.

The Kid was thanking his lucky stars that their left wrists were chained together. Althought it was more awkward for them afoot, it made it possible for them to ride double. Had they been cuffed left-to-right, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to mount and ride the same horse.

With his chained left hand he reached past Elko and grabbed the reins. Suddenly he let out a wild whoop and cut loose with his six-gun, firing into the ground behind the other horses.

The animals stampeded, terrified by the

sudden shooting and yelling. The Kid fired three shots to speed them on their way. Then, amid a chorus of angry yells from the thwarted lynchers, he lined out in the dusty wake of the stampede.

Behind, Pintail Joe was shouting orders at the top of his voice. His men scattered, seeking other mounts. It should be no trick for them to overtake the double-laden horse ridden by the fugitive and his hostage.

Pintail Joe himself was first to hit the saddle when he found a horse tethered in front of the watering trough at the Plains Mercantile Co. He took out after the escaping Calgary Kid. Other men were blazing away at the rapidly disappearing fugitive, hoping to wing the horse. With the Kid riding in the rear, Elko was shielded from their bullets.

The Calgary Kid headed hell-bent in the wake of the terrorized horses. He kept whooping at them, for he knew, because of their trailing bridles, they would soon stop unless he kept shoving them on. He rammed the revolver in his waistband, loosened the noose about his throat and threw the dragging rope away.

Behind him a single rider was splitting the wind down the moonlit street. It was only a matter of minutes until the rider overhauled him. Instead of trying to shoot backward, without the aid of stirrups to ease the motion of his galloping mount, he reined in and turned to face his pursuer.

He raised his six-gun and cut loose. The oncoming horse's forelegs buckled. It went down and the rider was flung through the air. As the Kid resumed his flight he saw Pintail Joe bounce to his feet and shake his fist.

The Calgary Kid was out of the frying pan, but he wasn't so certain he hadn't merely leaped into the fire. He didn't delude himself into thinking his double-laden horse could out-distance pursuit. And because he was chained to Elko, he was still in a helluva jam. They couldn't expect to reach the Border, riding this way, even if they could ditch their pursuers. The Border was some days' ride. They wouldn't dare appear in a town, nor would they dare show themselves at a ranch for food.

Elko was as eager to escape as he. However, capture meant merely a prison term for the rustler, whereas it meant death on the gallows for the Kid. If Elko helped capture the Kid he might expect a reduction in his sentence. Elko must be watched closely for treachery.

If he could only get rid of those handcuffs, the Kid's problem would be vastly simplified. But, lacking a key, they could be severed only in a blacksmith shop. Every ranch of any size possessed, of course, an anvil and horseshoeing equipment. But he couldn't overpower the entire crew of a ranch.

"They's one thing shore," he said, without realizing he was speaking aloud, "I got to git free of these bracelets!"

"You said it!" agreed Elko sullenly. "I'll do most anything to help get shut of these daggone shackles. But after that, it's each man for hisself!"

"Shore is," agreed the Kid. He reined in sharply, slid to the ground and ordered Elko to pile off. Looping the reins over the horn, he slapped the horse and sent it speeding off after the others.

CHAPTER IV

Beyond the Law

PESKY HENWOOD had been elected sheriff because Mustang County believed he could stop the range war that had gripped the region, accompanied by wholesale rustling and occasional killings.

A month after he took office Waterdog Banigan was killed and robbed of twelve hundred dollars won at seven-card draw. The Calgary Kid had been one of the losers who had contributed to Waterdog's big pot. He had accused Waterdog of cheating. They had tangled, and the Kid had lost his temper and made unwise threats in the presence of witnesses.

The next day Waterdog was killed and robbed. Pintail Joe and one of his pals swore

they had seen the Kid drygulch him, and hit out for the Border. The sheriff nabbed his friend, the Kid, without a struggle. The Kid denied the killing, insisting he'd been riding range ten miles from Skull Butte, the scene of the murder.

There were no witnesses to sustain the Kid's alibi claim. The jury found him guilty of murder in the first degree, and the penalty was fixed at death. The loot had not been recovered.

Meanwhile Sheriff Henwood caught Elko Aguilar blotting brands on stolen KY white-faces. It was an open-and-shut case. Elko had pleaded guilty and been given a two-to-six-year jolt.

Far from the jail now, the sheriff's two prisoners, handcuffed together, faced each other.

"Are you crazy, Kid?" demanded Elko angrily as he watched their horse gallop away.

"Like a fox," grinned the Kid, pulling Elko after him into a cluster of willows. "Jest to make sure you don't try to yell to them friends of yore'n, I'm going to muffle your bazoo with this bandanna. Now we'll head back to town."

He dragged Elko through the trees, back along the bank of the creek. Now and then he would shrink behind a clump and watch one or more of Pintail's men, who had succeeded in finding horses, thunder past on the supposed trail of the escaped prisoners.

"It'll take 'em a while to find they are chasing an empty saddle." He grinned. "By that time I'll have us unchained, Elko. I'm aiming to get t'other key to the bracelets from the sheriff's office!"

Elko gurgled in amazement behind his gag. He was at a loss to understand why a prisoner condemned to death should return to jail after once escaping.

They found the jail deserted. All the raiders had left to join the chase. From the rear the Kid slipped along the wall in the shadow, leading Elko. Gun in hand, he crept to the doorway, peered over the splintered ruins of the battered door.

No one was in the office. He stepped inside, drawing Elko with him. A glance showed him the office had already been ransacked by the raiders in their search for the key. Either Pintail Joe's men had found it, or it was locked in the safe which the searchers had been unable to penetrate. The Kid's heart sank.

Elko uttered a choking sound through his gag, and jerked on the handcuffs. The Kid looked up—and froze in his tracks.

In the cellroom doorway stood Sheriff Pesky Henwood. Blood was trickling down one side of his face from the bullet crease in his scalp. As the Kid saw his holster was empty, his heart leaped again with reborn hope.

"Goshamighty, Pesky, but I'm glad to see you!" he exclaimed, and leveled his six-gun at the officer. "Now you can just open that safe and haul out the keys, so's we can unlock these bracelets!"

SHERIFF HENWOOD blinked and looked about the demolished office. His gaze strayed through the open doorway to the deserted street. Slowly comprehension dawned in his eyes as he guessed what had happened while he had been senseless.

"Guess again, Kid," he retorted evenly. "I won't open it."

The Kid's eyes narrowed. "If you don't—" He left the sentence unfinished, but made a gesture with his revolver.

"You mean," said the sheriff with a faint smile, "that you'll shoot me if I don't? Go ahead. That'll mean you'll never get the key, 'cause I'm the only one that knows the combination!"

A cry of consternation burst from the Kid's lips. The sheriff had him, and he knew it. He stood motionless, undecided.

Then he snapped, "C'mon. Elko. We're going away from here!"

Sheriff Henwood suddenly leaped past and barred the way to the outer door.

"Don't you two move a step farther!" he warned.

The Kid laughed. "You're unarmed. You can't stop us. Get outa the way, before I shower down on you. I don't want to hurt you—I always liked you a heap, and don't hold it against you 'cause you did what you thought was your duty. But it's my life, and by the sixteen cockeyed horned toads, I'll let you have it if I have to!"

Pesky Henwood shrugged. "Go ahead

and shoot! You won't get outa here *without* killing me! I'd feel mighty disgraced if I let two prisoners get away from me, and I was still alive!"

The Kid stood motionless as a statue, gun leveled. His mind was working like lightning. He knew Pesky meant exactly what he said and had the nerve to carry out his threat.

The matter was squarely up to the Kid. He could kill the man and have a reasonable chance to make a getaway. It was his life, or the life of his friend.

"It's you or me, Pesky," he rasped. "I'll do anything rather than die kicking at the end of a rope. Here goes!"

He pulled the trigger.

He intended to send a bullet close to the sheriff's ear, hoping to throw the fear of Judge Colt into Pesky—the friend he could not force himself to kill, even to save his own life.

The hammer descended on an empty chamber. In a flash he counted the shots he had fired since he had snatched the weapon from Elko. He had shot the gun empty! And of course neither he nor Elko was wearing a cartridge belt!

At the click of the hammer the sheriff leaped forward. Not at Elko and the Kid, but toward a wall peg, where hung a cartridge belt and holstered gun.

The Kid's shoulders wilted. Fate had stacked the cards against him. With an exclamation of exasperation he flung the useless weapon to the floor.

"I'm going to make a break for the door, Pesky!" he warned. "Then you'll have to shoot me! I'd rather be shot than hanged. It's the only choice I got left!"

"I won't kill you, Kid," frowned the sheriff. "I'll just cripple you. I wisht you wouldn't make me do it. I hate to wound a jasper I like as much as I always liked you."

The kid halted in his tracks, helpless.

"You'd do it, too!" he said scornfully. "If you got to choose between friendship and duty—well, everybody knows you're a hog for duty. Take us back and lock us in our cells."

"Not so you can notice it!" Sheriff Pesky Henwood was grinning triumphantly. "A jail without any doors ain't a jail. Pintail Joe and his gang would be back and finish their job the minute they lernt you two was back here. I figgered to deliver you at the penitentiary tomorrow. I reckon they ain't any better time to start than right now. I can slide out with you and get you to the railroad before any of 'em quits combing the brakes of the crik for you. I'll just leave you cuffed and lock you in a cell until I can get a coupla hosses."

As they were being locked in the cell again Elko tore away his gag and began to cuss the Kid angrily.

"You could have bashed his head in with that empty gun!" he stormed. "Believe me, I wouldn't ever pass up a chanct like that!"

The Calgary Kid made no reply. He was in the depths of despair. His ingenuity had yanked him back from the very threshold of death. Yet an unlucky break had brought him back. Once more he was headed for the gallows.

Presently Sheriff Pesky Henwood returned. He unlocked the cell, led them outside. Two saddled horses were waiting in the shadow of the jail.

The Kid had been hoping against hope that Sheriff Henwood would provide a horse for each of his prisoners, following the usual custom of handcuffing each prisoner to a saddle rigging ring. This would have meant a better chance for escape. If he once could make a break by himself, alone.

Which was exactly the reason, apparently, why Sheriff Henwood had decided to leave them chained together. They would have to ride double, but once they were out of town unseen, there would be little likelihood of another raid. Their progress would be slower, but each prisoner would be a ball and chain shackled to the other.

"I'm going to make a break before we get to the railroad," the Kid told himself grimly. "I'll force him to shoot me!"

"I'm going to make a break," Elko whispered when they were in the saddle, repeating the Kid's thoughts. "He musta got the key. He wouldn't start to the pen with us, without some way to unlock the bracelets when he gets us there. And I ain't going to the pen!"

CHAPTER V

Coyote Blood

MUSTANG was almost deserted as they made their way up the creek in the shadow of the willows until they were beyond the limits of the town. Most of the townspeople had joined in the chase, were scouring the country for the Calgary Kid and Elko Aguilar. As they passed under the bridge two horsemen jogging into town hailed them. The two could have known nothing of the raid on the jail, for they made no attempt to give the alarm.

Sheriff Henwood circled as soon as he was out of sight of Mustang, and struck out straight along the base of the foothills for the railroad. His route would take him only a few miles from the Moccasin ranch and later from Skull Butte. However, the Moccasin ranch would be deserted.

"Now all we got to do, boys," he told them, smiling faintly, "is to jog along and enjoy the scenery. The raiders will spend the night hunting the brakes of the crik for you two. They'll never guess you were crazy enough to come back to jail. I'll have the two of you safe in the pen before they wake up to what's happened."

Elko, riding in the saddle in front of the Kid, kept twisting about scanning every draw and gully. The Kid knew the rustler was hoping Pintail Joe and his horsemen might discover them. Elko had everything to win and nothing to lose through such an attack.

The Calgary Kid, however, was almost indifferent. After all, he thought bitterly, the appearance of Pintail Joe's gang meant merely the difference between hanging from a limb or a gallows. A swell choice!

"Pesky," he said to the sheriff, "I didn't really go for to kill you when I cut down on you with that gun. I thought I could bluff you. I don't want to go to the pen and leave you thinking I'd try to knock off my own friend to save my hide."

Sheriff Henwood shrugged and dragged on his cigarette. "What's the dif, Kid? I wouldn't of blamed you. But don't make it any harder for me than it is. I'd give a hind leg not to be the one to take you to the pen. But it's got to be done. You were convicted fair and square. There ain't a doubt in my mind you're guilty. And if you're guilty you deserve what's coming to you!"

"What if I swore I was innocent, Pesky? Wouldn't you take the word of a friend?"

Pesky shrugged again.

"A gent wil swear to anything when his neck's in the noose, Kid. When a lie will save a jasper's life, he's mighty likely to stretch the truth. No, Kid, I wouldn't take the word of anybody under such circumstances!"

"Pesky," remarked the Kid, his lip curling, "I believe you'd send your own brother to the gallows!"

The sheriff flinched under the sting of the Kid's words.

"I would, Kid. And I'd not dodge the job, if he was guilty."

Elko horned into the palaver.

"If I was to get away from you, Sheriff, nobody'd ever be the wiser, would they? They'd think me and this killer here found a way to unlock the cuffs and separate. You could say you trailed him down, but couldn't find me. That would let you outa any blame."

"What are you driving at?" the officer demanded.

"They's a lot of things you could buy with a thousand dollars, Sheriff," said Elko pointedly.

Pesky snorted. "Trying to bribe me, hombre?"

"Me?" inquired Elko innocently. "Why I just thought it would be worth a thousand bucks to me to get the key to these handcuffs. You could show up at the pen with the Calgary Kid, and nobody would ever know I hadn't lost myself in the brakes of the crik."

The sheriff cursed angrily.

"Why, you slab-sided son of a sidewinder, if you wasn't handcuffed, I'd beat the everlasting stuffing out of you! D'you figger I'm a lousy crook, like you are?"

"And besides," Elko went on smoothly, "I

could put it in your way to pick up as much more every few months. You'll never get anywhere on the fees you earn serving summonses. Get wise, hombre. They're all doing it."

"That's a lie!" cried Pesky. "For every crooked officer, there's a hundred on the level, you rat! I don't bribe worth a cent, Elko!"

THE convicted cattle rustler seemed puzzled. But the Kid had to admit it took a backbone as stiff as a ramrod to withstand appeals to friendship and an offer of money.

"Daggone it all, Pesky!" he exclaimed. "I'm for you! I'm sorry I was trying to make it tough for you, jest now. After I'm hanged, please remember that I didn't hold anything against you for doing what you figger is your duty!"

"Thanks, Kid," said the sheriff, as Elko turned in the saddle and glared.

They rode on in silence. Every hour the sheriff made them change horses with him, and likewise change their positions, so each would get a chance to ride in the saddle.

Long after midnight Elko, riding behind the Kid, whispered over his shoulder.

"We're saps to let him take us to the pen without making some sort of breakaway try, Kid. It oughtn't to be much of a trick to jump him whilst we're changing horses, and take the key away from him. How about it?"

"All right," the Kid agreed after a moment. "But they ain't goin' to be no killing. We'll grab him and take his gun, get the key and unlock the handcuffs, and then handcuff him and leave him. But I won't stand for shootin'."

Presently all three again dismounted. As the shackled prisoners started past the unsuspecting officer, the Kid jerked the handcuffs as the signal for the attack. Together they leaped at their captor.

As they leaped, Pesky sprang backward and reached for his holster. He whipped out his six-gun as the two crashed into him. The Kid grabbed for his gun wrist. He didn't mean to give him the chance to shoot, even though death at the gun muzzle seemed infinitely preferable to death at the end of a rope. Now that there seemed a chance to escape, life seemed mighty sweet and he didn't intend to lose it through carelessness or lack of fighting fury.

The man twisted about violently, striving mightily to wrench the gun free. The Kid clung tenaciously. Elko charged in, his free hand seeking a hold on the officer.

Pesky's fist crashed into the Kid's face. The Kid had to take it. He dared not relax his grip on the sheriff's wrist.

"Stick with him, Kid!" panted Elko. "Hold him till I get my hand on the gun! I'll twist it free!"

Sheriff Henwood was jerking backward. He was trying to yank his hand free, and at the same time keep free of a clinch with both prisoners.

With his free hand he caught the charging Elko squarely between the eyes, his bony knuckles leaving white streaks as they struck. The terriffic wallop snapped Elko's head backward. He staggered, and would have fallen had he not been chained to the Kid.

As it was, the strain as he stumbled backward wrenched the Kid's left arm and almost tore his grip free from Pesky's gun hand. He lurched forward, yanking on the handcuffs. The yank caught the staggering Elko and prevented him from falling. Elko charged in again.

Instantly Pesky had concentrated his attention on the Kid. Before Elko came boring in again, the sheriff had driven three smashing blows into the Kid's face.

The Kid was taking terrific punishment. The wallops rocked his head and left him dizzy. But he could only hold onto Pesky's wrist, hope that Elko got the gun.

Elko's hand closed on the muzzle of the .45. He twisted it sidewise. Pesky, teeth bared and every sinew strained, battled desperately to depress the muzzle enough to bring it to bear on one of his two prisoners. But the Kid's grip on his wrist and Elko's on the weapon kept the muzzle elevated and harmless.

The sheriff wrenched and writhed, retreating step by step. The Kid rammed his shoulder into the pit of the officer's stomach. He charged forward, lifting as he charged. He swept the struggling Pesky clear of the earth. The three of them crashed to the ground.

CHAPTER VI

Temptation

ELKO was first to bounce to his feet. "I've got it!" he shrieked. "I got the gun!"

The Calgary Kid released his grip on the sheriff's wrist. He flung himself backward, rolled off the prostrate, struggling form and leaped erect.

As he gained his feet the captured weapon in Elko's hand blazed. The detonation startled him. The rustler was crouching, teeth bared in a wolfish snarl of hate. The gun was turned on the fallen sheriff. Already he had sent one bullet into the body of the prostrate officer.

The Kid was filled with horror at the wanton shooting of the defenseless Pesky. He sprang at Elko with a cry of rage, grabbed the six-gun by the barrel and strove to wrench it free.

"You diamondback!" he spat. "There was no need to shoot him after you'd got the gun! Nobody but a coward would shot him whilst he was defenseless on the ground!"

"He's the law!" rasped Elko malevolently. "Get outa the way, while I finish him off!"

The two struggled for possession of the revolver. The sheriff rose uncertainly to his feet. Blood stained the right side of his vest, just above his belt. He took a tottering step or two, then pitched forward on his face. He fought to get up again, managed to get to his hands and knees. With bulldog courage he started crawling toward the struggling men. Again he fell forward on his face.

"You fool!" panted the Kid as he wrestled with Elko. "If you kill him it'll mean the gallows, sure, when they catch you!"

"They won't catch me!" growled the rustler. "Soon as I get the key, I'll be heading for the Border—alone! Besides, if they caught me I'd swear you done it, and nobody could prove different!"

As they struggled for possession of the weapon, neither could gain an advantage. They were deadlocked, like two battling buck deer with locked horns. "I was plenty willing to make my getaway, but not to kill Pesky!" panted the Kid. "I'll keep you here forever, rather than see you finish him off!"

"All right!" agreed Elko sullenly. "I won't shoot him again. Maybe you're right about not knotting a noose 'round my neck. I'll make a deal with you. In return for not shooting him, I'll keep the gun. We'll get the key and unlock these cuffs. Then we'll each take one hoss, and part company. But—I keep the gun!"

They ceased struggling, backed away as far as the handcuffs would permit. Elko kept the gun. He knelt by the prostrate sheriff and hastily began searching his pockets. He began to curse, and rolled him over on his back. Finally he shook the wounded man violently.

"Where's that key?" he demanded savagely. "Where have you hid it? I've searched every pocket. It ain't there!"

Pesky Henwood opened his eyes. There was pain in them—and triumph as he answered.

"You poor idiot. D'you reckon any officer would be fool enough to carry the handcuff key with him when he's taking prisoners to the pen? Don't you know they keep a duplicate key at the prison, so the officer never has to take the chance of having the cuffs unlocked by the prisoners?"

The baffled Elko cursed blistering blue blazes. He started to shake the wounded man again. The Kid jerked him roughly away with the handcuffs.

"Can't you see he's wounded bad?" he demanded angrily. "Git away from him, and let me bandage up that bullet wound!"

"Not so you can notice it!" snarled Elko, panicky as the realization of his plight dawned upon him. "We're going to hop the best hoss and hightail it to the Moccasin ranch, where there's a blacksmith shop to cut these blinketty-blanked chains off'n us—no—I changed my mind. I dassn't take a chance of going back. We're going to hightail it for the Border, riding double and taking the sheriff's hoss for a spare! We ain't got any time to waste on lawmen!"

THE Kid was kneeling by Pesky's side. He said, "He's hit pretty bad, Elko. I'll fix him up, then we'll load him onto one of the hosses, and take him to the nearest doctor, at the railroad town. He'll die if we don't get him to a doc pretty soon."

"Let him die!" stormed Elko. "You must be plumb crazy, hombre! Why, that means they'll nab us! Send you to the gallows!" He jerked backward on the handcuffs, yanking the Kid to his feet.

"I reckon it means just that!" admitted the Kid soberly. "But I can't leave Pesky here to die. Why, I'd feel like a murderer!"

"A murderer?" screamed Elko, and burst into a hysterical laugh. "Why, you are. You murdered Waterdog Bannigan!"

"No, I never murdered him," replied the Kid evenly. "But I couldn't prove it. I'm going to see that Pesky gets to a doctor. He's my friend."

"Helluva friend he is—taking you to the pen to be hanged! If I had a friend like that, I'd be glad to let him die!"

"You would," agreed the Kid, kneeling again by the side of the wounded officer, and tearing a strip from his shirt.

"You rat!" yelled Elko, pointing the six-gun at the Kid. "There ain't any time to lose! Forget this lunatic idea of saving that dashety-blanked lawman, and c'mon with me! If you don't I'll blow your brains out!"

The Kid scarcely looked up as he started bandaging Pesky's wound. "Nope, Elko, that's one thing you won't do. You got the gun, but you dassn't use it—on me!"

"Why not?" shouted Elko. Why I'd as soon shoot you as—"

"That would cook your goose!" explained the Kid, without even looking up. "You couldn't reach the Border with a dozen horses—not with a corpse chained to you. You'd have to wait right here. They'd find you, chained to the body of the man you murdered, and alongside the wounded sheriff!"

Elko stared with gaping mouth. The truth was slow in seeping through his brain. At last he swallowed and spoke.

"I got a gun, but it won't talk for me. It's the first time in my life a forty-five wouldn't give a gent the leverage! You—yuh

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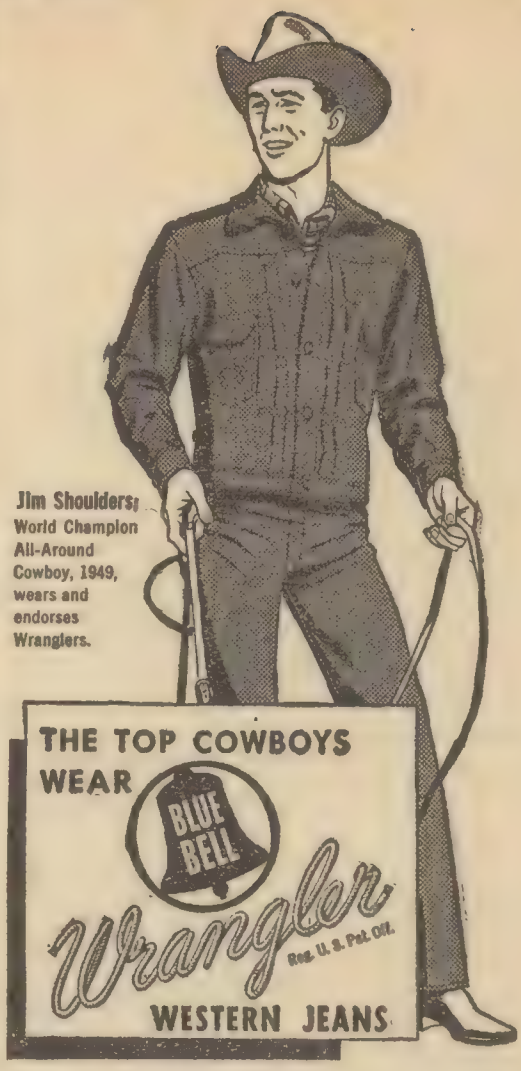
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got me with a downhill drag, Kid. Go ahead and bandage him up, whilst I figger this out."

Pesky's wound would have been fatal had it been two inches higher. It was critical enough, as it was. Without medical attention, it might easily enough end in death.

"Don't worry, old-timer," the Kid soothed the officer as he bound the wound awkwardly with Elko forced to kneel close alongside. "We'll get you to the doc by dawn. He'll fix you up."

"I'm not worrying," Pesky muttered weakly. "I'm wondering, Kid, I thought you was lying when you said you hadn't intended to shoot me back in my office. Now I kinda believe you! But I got to warn you that it won't make a mite of difference with me. I'll take you to the pen—if I can."

"Forget it," advised the Kid as he and the bewildered Elko hoisted the wounded officer back into the saddle. "And take it easy. Sing out if you feel dizzy. Let's go."

"Jest a minute," put in Elko craftily as he and the Kid mounted their own horse. "This is the first time ever I knew Judge Colt couldn't speak every man's language. But I got a proposition you can't refuse!"

"I don't want to hear no more propositions," retorted the Kid. He had forced Elko to ride in the saddle. The rustler had the six-gun, but he was as helpless as if he had been unarmed. The Kid had the upper hand. The Kid wasn't sure he had made the right choice. Why should he deliberately throw his life away to save the man who was bent on sending him to the gallows?

"Listen, Kid," the crafty Elko was saying, "there ain't no need of us taking the risk of riding into town with him. He's conscious. He can ride there hisself."

"Button your lip," growled the Kid.

"Listen! I savvy where they's a thousand bucks, waiting for you, Kid! But only if me and you hit for the Border, 'stead of the railroad town. Freedom and money, Kid! 'stead of prison and—death!"

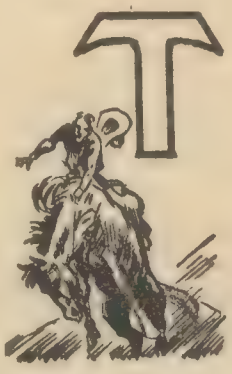
Sheriff Henwood, weaving slightly in the saddle and clinging to the saddlehorn, snapped, "You're wasting your breath, making that kind of a proposition to the Calgary Kid."

"I don't know," admitted the Kid doubtfully. "If I could turn Pesky loose clost enough to town so's we could still get away, maybe—"

"I knowed you'd see the light, Kid!" cried Elko triumphantly.

CHAPTER VII

Gunfire Test



THE wounded sheriff looked at the Kid oddly, then shook his head sadly, but said nothing.

"We'll slant off to the left," beamed Elko, changing their course slightly. "I'm beginning to change my mind about you, Kid. Maybe me and you could team up when we reach the other side of the Border."

"Maybe," conceded the Kid. "Where at you aiming to get this thousand bucks?"

"It's stashed at the foot of Skull Butte. See that sorta cleft, risin' up from the edge of that dry wash? It's right inside—"

He broke off as a distant cry cut through the cool night air. All three turned their heads quickly. Far behind a group of horsemen were bulging over a swell, silhouetted against the feeble glow of the false dawn, like statuettes. "It's Pintail Joe and the boys!" cried Elko gleefully.

"Uh-huh," muttered Sheriff Henwood huskily. "They musta got a line on us from them two riders we passed at the bridge."

"Hurry!" cried the Kid, kicking their horses in the flanks. "We can get to the cleft, and stand 'em off until—"

"Not so you can notice it, we won't!" rumbled Elko harshly. "All bets are off now! I don't have to pay you a dime! Pintail will take us back to the Moccasin ranch, and cut these handcuffs with a cold chisel!"

"—and then," added the Kid grimly, "they'll turn me into cottonwood fruit!"

Suddenly the Kid knew he must get that gun from Elko at all costs. Elko would not be afraid to shoot him now. He grabbed at the weapon. But Elko whisked it from his

belt an instant before the Kid grabbed.

Behind them the raiders whooped wildly. Guns were beginning to pop, shattering the stillness of the hour before the dawn.

Elko could not turn about and bring his weapon to bear upon the Kid, and the young cowboy was gripping his pistol wrist. Their frightened horse bolted. The sheriff's horse followed, its semi-conscious rider swaying dangerously, clinging desperately to the horn.

The Kid could not bring enough pressure to bear to force Elko's gun arm down. But the handcuffs gave him a leverage upon which he hadn't counted. He yanked Elko's left arm behind his back, and began forcing it up between his shoulders. Elko cried out.

The Kid felt the rustler's gun arm relax. Then the six-gun was in his own hand. He jammed the muzzle into Elko's ribs.

"Kid!" called Pesky weakly. "Head for town! We'll find plenty of help there!"

"We're heading for the cleft in Skull Butte!" cried the Kid, his voice as cold and hard as steel. "That's where the money is!"

Pintail Joe and his riders were rapidly overhauling the double-laden horse. Bullets were singing around their heads when they slid to the ground in front of the cleft. Sheriff Henwood was too weak to stand. But he was still conscious, and as he wilted down against the rock, he snapped, "Roll a coupla them big rocks in front of the cleft, Kid, and you can stand 'em off forever!"

But the Kid ignored him and pushed into the cleft, dragging Elko after him.

"Where's that money stashed?" he demanded harshly.

Elko laughed. "You can't make me tell you, Kid. Now *I* got the leverage."

"You forget," ripped the Kid savagely, "that I'm already due to be hanged, so killing you can't make matters any worse for me! Dig up that dough!"

HE JAMMED the six-gun violently into Elko's ribs. In the dark he heard Elko whimper slightly. The rustler dived for a loose rock, and in a moment removed a bundle of bank notes from beneath it.

"Take it, damn you," he said. "But you won't have it long. Pintail Joe's got us surrounded. You can't git away. You'll never be able to spend a penny of that thousand across the Border!"

Sheriff Henwood was calling weakly: "Any water hereabouts? I'm gitting dizzy."

And from behind the cleft the voice of Pintail Joe.

"Sheriff, you sure run a whizzer on us by grabbing them two prisoners right from under our noses. I don't know how you done it, but we caught you in time. We're giving you one more chanct to deliver 'em up to us, peaceable. If you don't, we'll take 'em!"

There was no word from Pesky Henwood. The sheriff had passed out.

"Joe!" bellowed Elko before the Kid could silence him. "The sheriff's wounded, the Kid's armed, and he's still handcuffed to me! Tell him you'll take him back to the ranch and cut the handcuffs and turn him loose so's he can hop to the Border! If you don't he'll—

"Hobble your tongue!" the Kid interrupted, jabbing Elko with the muzzle of the six-gun. "I'll do the talking. You can be hoisting Sheriff Henwood acrost the saddle of his horse. We'll be moving in a minute."

Then he yelled to Pintail Joe: "Hombre, I wouldn't trust you or Elko as far as a horned toad can spit! If I took up your proposition, I'd be cold meat ten seconds after you'd cut off the bracelets!"

"You ain't got no choice!" taunted Pintail. "We got a kink in your tail! You can take our proposition, or leave it!"

"I'll leave it!" yelled the Kid, and to Elko: "Tie that sheriff so he won't bounce off the saddle! Then climb onto the other hoss. We're going away from here!"

"You mean, you're aimin' to take the sheriff along to the Border with us as a hostage?" gasped Elko, as a fresh burst of gunfire came. "That's a plumb smart idea—if you ever get through my friends out there!"

The Kid chuckled as they climbed onto their horse. "The sheriff ain't the hostage. You are!"

He kicked their mount. In his handcuffed hand he held the reins of the sheriff's horse with its unconscious burden. Whoops and redoubled gunfire came from Pintail Joe and his men as they saw the shadow of the moving horse an instant before it emerged from the gloom of the cleft.

"Don't shoot!" screamed Elko.

The Kid chuckled again.

The firing ceased abruptly. The strange little cavalcade emerged from the shadows.

"Don't make a phony move, boys! He'll blow me inside out! He's got a gun in my back!" Elko yelled.

The Kid didn't head for the Border, but lined out on the trail to the railroad town.

The day had dawned when three men on two horses rode into town. Far behind, on the last rolling sagebrush swell, lingered a group of horsemen, like a pack of timber wolves deprived of their kill. Excited queries were shot at Sheriff Henwood, who had recovered sufficiently to sit erect in the saddle.

"I'm bringing in the murderer of Waterdog Banigan," he announced weakly. "He's slated to go to the pen, to be hanged."

"And the other?"

"Yuh mean the Calgary Kid—the one with the gun, who's wearing the badge I pinned on him? Oh, he's going to be my new depitty, just as soon as he gets his pardon from the governor."

"—is Elko Aguilar. He killed Waterdog Waterdog! This other gent—"

"—is Elko Aguilar. He killed Waterdog for his gambling winnings when he seen a chanct to blame it onto the Kid. Where he passed a bet was when he offered to bribe us both. He took us right to the spot where he'd stashed the loot. Promised us a thousand outa the twelve hundred. Plenty can identify the money as Waterdog's winnings. The fact that Elko led us to the cache is enough to convict him of murder and git a pardon for the Kid!"

"One swell break for the Kid! Why, the lucky—"

"Break? Luck? Not so you can notice it!" The sheriff smiled wanly. "The Kid worked it all out his ownself! When I figgered he'd sold out to Elko for a thousand bucks, he was simply leading him on, trapping him into revealing the hiding place of the loot, which was the evidence needed to free the Kid and convict Elko!

"That's why I pinned the badge on the Kid. That's why he's going to be a lawman 'stead of goin' to the gallows! Brain and backbone is a combination hard to beat, when you find it in a hard-fightin', straight-shootin' gent like the Calgary Kid!"

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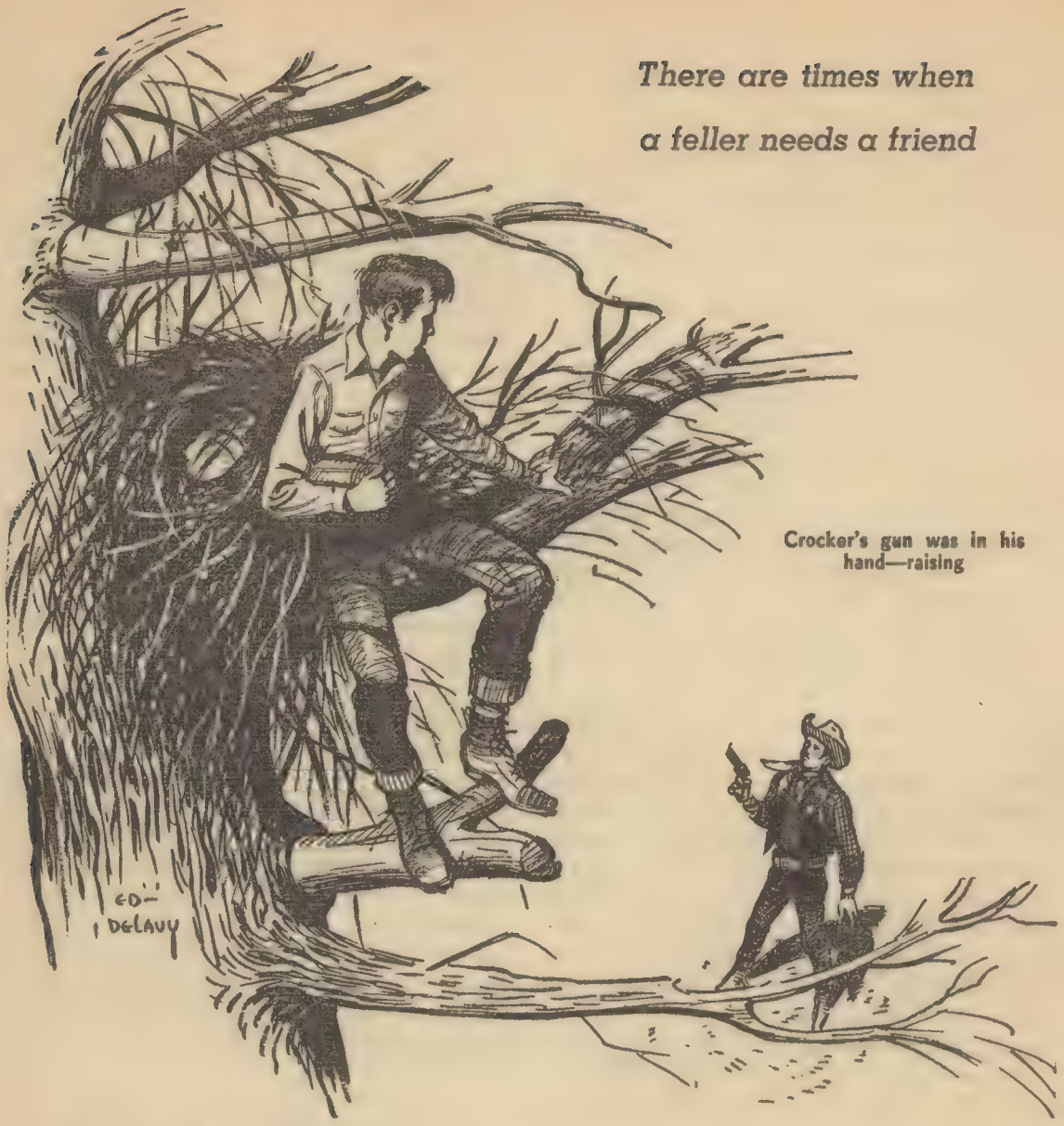
There are times when a feller needs a friend



Crocker's gun was in his hand—raising

RANGE ORPHAN

By LEWIS B. PATTEN

THEY found Ron Eversman squatted beside a tiny campfire at dawn and killed him with their rifles as he tried to escape, but they never found the twelve thousand in specie he'd taken from the stage. So they went to his house, a dirt-floored shack in the middle of the hundred and sixty acres he'd homesteaded several years before when his kids were tiny and his wife was still with him. They didn't think he'd been there, but they weren't overlooking any bets.

Neither Tommy Eversman nor his sister, Susie, had seen Ron for nearly a week.

Tommy, from necessity, had been foraging the night before and had a chicken on the stove stewing for breakfast. He never had a chance to hide it and they'd have found it anyway. Sheriff Crocker, tired and irritable from the long night in the open, shoved him aside without much ceremony and went inside, and a few of the others followed reluctantly.

Tommy was skinny and ragged. His face was sharp, his eyes an unfriendly gray that watched the sheriff without expression, without even revealing the antipathy behind them. He was small for his age, but there was a lot of self-sufficiency and pride packed into his small frame. Folks would never know from Tommy that Ron provided a very small part of what they had to eat. He was always cautioning Susie, "Just don't talk about pa. Then you won't be tellin' folks how long it's been since we seen him. Anyhow, it's our business—not nobody else's."

Tommy's urge to conceal his father's failure to provide for them was motivated only by concern for Ron's welfare. Ron meant well, but folks didn't always understand that. A lot of living and a lot of worry and responsibility lay behind Tommy in his twelve years of life. If he had not understood Ron so well, he might have hated him. But he knew Ron—probably better than Ron knew himself. Ron was just flighty and lazy and unthinking. Ron had never been in serious trouble before, but it looked like he was in some now. It didn't surprise Tommy too much. Folks like Ron couldn't stay out of trouble forever. Even Tommy knew that.

It made him angry, though, not knowing what they were after, or what Ron had done. How could he help Ron if he didn't even know what trouble Ron was in?

The Sheriff tore everything out of the dresser that Tommy had made for Susie out of old apple boxes, searched under the bunks and in the straw-filled mattresses, and even dug up the floor in a place where it was a little uneven. Frank Sandusky, the Judge's son, who had forsaken the law in favor of ranching and who was Tommy's nearest neighbor, watched with distaste.

Crocker lifted the lid off the pot, smelled, and gave Tommy a hard look and a gruff, "Just like your pa, ain't you, kid?"

Frank broke his silence with, "Lay off, Crocker. This is hard enough without rubbin' it in. Besides, I'm commencin' to wonder if it had to come out this way. Ron wasn't showin' no fight."

Tommy had stolen the chicken and the Sheriff knew it. That was the way the kids lived—by stealing—or rather buying without the owner's knowledge or permission. Tommy would go at night and raid a neighbor's cellar or hen house, but it wouldn't be too many days before he'd show up with a load of wood and say, "I ain't very busy an' I was gettin' myself some firewood. Thought you might like a load."

If pay was offered, and it often was, Tommy'd say scornfully, "We don't need no money. Pa gives us plenty. But thanks anyhow."

Or maybe the neighbor who was missing a fat, old hen—never a layer—would find a newly repaired section of fence, or maybe he'd find a corral mended or a bit of brush cleared when he got back from town. Tommy had to eat, but he had to save his pride and Ron's too. Most of the folks tolerated it, grinning and saying, "That blasted kid just likes to steal—can't help himself," but Frank Sandusky never grinned with them and when he'd look at Tommy there was a lot of liking in his smooth, open face—and a lot of understanding. He'd mutter angrily to himself, "Savin' Ron's face is sure a high-priced proposition for that kid!"

Tommy had been worried at first about the chicken. When it began to look like Crocker wasn't going to do anything about that, and when Susie got scared and began to cry, he felt the anger rising in him. He shrilled, trying to keep his voice from breaking, "By golly, if pa was around you jiggers wouldn't come bustin' in like this. He'd kill you!"

Sheriff Crocker was a hard man. His mind and his thoughts were just as hard as his jutting jaw and his blocky, muscular body. His eyes were a chill blue, narrow-set and blank. He had no friends. How could he? Before you can be friends with a man you have to know him. Nobody knew Crocker. He growled, "Your pa won't kill nobody,

kid. He's dead."

Right then Frank Sandusky turned and stamped angrily outside, muttering, "Damn you, Crocker! Make it just as rough as you can!" But while the rest of them were mounting, he came back in and laid a clumsy, comforting hand on Tommy's ragged shoulder. "Ron held up the stage last night, Tommy. We picked up his trail and followed until dark, an' then we lost him. But a couple of passengers had recognized him. We come out this way at dawn and found him camped a couple of miles from here. He tried to run an'—Tommy, I wish I hadn't had anything to do with it. I'm sorry."

Tommy stared up at him with eyes that Frank could not meet. Tommy asked in a strange, adult voice, "Did you have to kill him?"

And Frank answered truthfully, reluctantly, "No. No—we didn't. But Crocker said to shoot, an' we all did. There just ain't no excuse for it, I reckon."

THAT was the way Tommy learned of Ron's death, but the full realization of death is slow in coming, especially to a twelve-year-old. It was hard for him to comprehend that carefree, unthinking Ron wouldn't be coming anymore with his saddlebags loaded with hard candy and with a gunnysack of grub tied across the saddle behind as though that little bit would last forever.

Ron, completely irresponsible and selfish without ever meaning to be, didn't often think of his kids. When he did, his conscience would make him ride out with grub and little presents for them. Other times, he'd stay around the saloon in town, or maybe work a week or two helping out branding or haying or riding, and the kids would make it on their own out at what Ron called his "ranch".

The Sheriff rode up to the door as he was leaving. "You better watch it, kid. You keep raidin' henhouses an' you'll wind up just like your pa." Whirling his horse, he called over his shoulder at the posse, "He's hid the gold out somewhere, but it ain't here."

Tommy murmured soundlessly, venomously, "You wait, you just wait. You're gonna be sorry. You'll see," as he watched them out of the yard.

He tried to put the place to rights after they left, crossly telling Susie as he wiped her nose, "Quit that darn snivelin'. We'll be all right. They're gone now." He kind of wished he could be alone. A burning, achy sensation behind his eyes told him how good it would feel to cry.

But Susie was still fretting from fright and he set the steaming chicken on the table, knowing her appetite, knowing this would quiet her. She grabbed a drumstick in her grubby, seven-year-old hands and gnawed at it voraciously.

Tommy hunted around for the other drumstick, grunting irritably, "By golly, I remember cuttin' off two legs. Seems like I did anyway. Every chicken I ever heard tell of had two legs. This'n ain't though."

It didn't seem right to eat with pa hardly cold, but the savory smell of the chicken rising to his nostrils and the demands of his growing body overcame his reluctance. He sank his teeth into a piece of breast, wishing fleetingly for some bread to go with it.

The two demolished nearly half of the chicken. When they were finished, Tommy, his curiosity now thoroughly aroused, counted pieces, finding not only the drumstick missing, but two other pieces as well.

He murmured under his breath, "Pa was here last night. Pa's the one that took them pieces of chicken. I bet if old Crocker knew that he'd tear this place apart board by board."

He washed Susie's face and let her go outside to play while he tidied up a little. At midmorning he was grubbing brush on the north side of the tiny field when he saw the dust coming along the road from town. Wiping sweat from his forehead, he leaned on the axe and watched.

It was Judge Sandusky's buckboard, and as it drew near he could see the old Judge and Ma Sandusky and Sheriff Crocker riding crowded together on the high, spring seat.

"We come to take you kids to the funeral," said the Judge, checking the horses, looking somewhat distastefully at Tommy's tousled, uncut hair, his ragged, not too clean clothing. "Then we'll try an'

figure out somebody to kind of look after you."

"We can look after ourselves all right. We don't need no help."

"Hmmm," the Judge said judiciously. The word vouchsafed neither agreement nor disagreement. Ma got down and went into the house and found some clothes in the apple-box dresser that were not so ragged, and set to in her efficient, unhurried way to wash them and dry them over the stove, while the Judge and the Sheriff fretted outside beside the buckboard at the delay.

In mid afternoon they held the funeral. Tommy sat in the rough, pine pew in the church and fixed his eyes determinedly on a knot in the pew-back in front of him, biting his lower lip a little, clutching Susie's now clean hand in his own.

Behind him he could hear the subdued whispering of a woman over the monotonously intoned sermon of the preacher.

"Something ought to be done about them two. I'd take 'em, but I got my own to think about. That boy—if you could hear him swear—why my stars, it's a fright. And they say he steals everything he can lay his hands to!"

Tommy jumped, half turned, then settled back, anger a dark flush on his face. He thought, "I hate 'em! I hate 'em! I'll run away an' git me a job somewheres." Then he thought of Susie, and suddenly resented her bitterly. He became conscious of her hand, warm and damp within his own, and a hasty glance showed him that her eyes were closed, her head laid crookedly against the hard, pew-back. With a purely automatic gesture, he pulled it impatiently down against his shoulder.

He guessed he'd have to stay and look after Susie. He'd been taking care of her for so long—hell, he couldn't quit her now. None of these damn people would look after her. He scowled. Cussin'. That was what that woman meant. He was cussin' even in his thoughts.

The hardest thing he ever did was to look at pa, and at that, it was only a fleeting look. He hurried Susie on past before she was sufficiently awake to look around. He could feel the stares of the townsfolk, watching him, waiting for him to cry. He thought savagely, "Why couldn't they of just left us alone? Why'd they make us come and look at what they done to him? Why they keep pesterin' us?"

SHERIFF CROCKER and his wizened, vinegary wife took Tommy and Susie in after the funeral, pending other arrangements to be made by the Judge. Tommy didn't like it, but he had Susie to think of as well as himself and it was only for a few days. The Judge said so.

On the morning of the day after the funeral, Crocker came out to where Tommy was squatting in the sun against the jail wall, chewing a stem of grass. With forced joviality and obvious insincerity, he laid a heavy hand on the boy's shoulder.

"How you making it, son?"

"All right, I guess. But I got to get home. When you going to let us go home?" Tommy's voice was surly and mirrored his dislike of Crocker. He kept telling himself that you couldn't blame a man for doing his job, but somehow he couldn't forget that this man had given the order to kill Ron unnecessarily.

"Was your pa home night afore last, boy?"

Tommy said noncommittally, "I never seen him."

Crocker forced a grin. "Reason I asked, he was cookin' chicken when we found him. I went out there yesterday to look around and found it layin' on the ground close to his fire. Three pieces. I reckoned mebbe—"

Tommy shrugged. Crocker asked, "Supposin' Ron was out home that night? You got any idee where he might have hid that gold?"

Tommy's mind went immediately to the huge, dried magpie's nest in the old cottonwood down by the creek. Tommy used to hide stuff there when he was smaller. He remembered Ron saying once, "If we ever have any money, boy, that'd be a danged good place to hide it. Nobody'd ever think of lookin' there, would they?"

He answered cautiously, "I'll think on it. Can't say right off. Why'nt you take some men an' go out an' look?"

"Oh, everybody's busy. Besides, they'd wreck things out there for you."

Tommy remembered the way Crocker had tossed things around. He almost said, "A lot you'd care," but he bit his lip and stayed silent. The Sheriff cautioned as he turned away, "If you think of anything, don't tell nobody else. Tell me. I'm the Sheriff an' it's my job to find that money."

Tommy sat motionless for ten minutes. Then he heard the whistle of the train in the distance and got up, wandering slowly toward the station to watch it come in. Tommy wasn't often in town and trains were a novelty. It screeched to a stop that shook the boards of the station platform. Tommy stared in wonder.

Three men got off and after a hurried conference, headed uptown. They were dressed differently than the local people and one of them wore glasses. Tommy followed, partly from curiosity, partly from boredom.

They went into the sheriff's office and Tommy resumed his place on the sunny side of the jail, now watching a group of children playing run-sheep-run down the street a ways.

Through the open window, Tommy heard the words, "Wells Fargo," and pricked up his ears. "We want that gold," a clipped, harsh voice said. "We're offering a thousand dollars reward for its recovery."

"I'm doin' the best I can, gents. Eversman never made it as far as his place that night, so there ain't no use lookin' there. I can take you as far as we trailed him that night, but no further. It's rained twice since then. You can look for yourselves, but it's just flat, prairie land. No place to hide nothin'."

Tommy thought, "He's lyin' to them. He knows pa was home that night. I wonder if he's figurin' on findin' that gold an' keepin' it for himself!"

Another man was speaking inside. "You think the kid knows where it is? You think maybe Eversman got word to him some way?"

"Well," the Sheriff said dubiously. "I dunno. I've talked to the kid an' he don't say much. That must be what's happened though. Eversman hid it out somewhere an' sent the kid word where to find it. If you can make him talk, gents, you're welcome to try."

"Tomorrow," the first man grunted. "We're going over to the hotel an' wash up right now." As he went out he said irritably to his companions, "Why in hell do all tank town Sheriffs have to be so damn quick on the trigger? If Eversman was alive we wouldn't have no trouble finding that money."

NOW, with these words and what he already knew or suspected, it was as though the Sheriff's whole plan was laid out for Tommy to see. The Sheriff wanted to find the gold, keep it, make it appear that likely Tommy knew where it was, but wouldn't tell. Tommy could almost hear the woman that had been behind him at the funeral saying, "They got Ron Eversman but they never found the gold. That boy of his? Sure he knows where it is. Believe you me, he's just like his pa. He'll come to no good end."

Tommy watched the Wells Fargo men down the street and then poked his head into the Sheriff's office, a plan stirring in his head. "I thought I might go out an' look around for you if you'd let me take a horse." The plan was vague as yet. All Tommy wanted now was to find the gold, prevent the Sheriff from finding it and keeping it for himself. If Tommy knew Crocker had it, the Sheriff would have to give it back to the Wells Fargo men.

Crocker brightened visibly. "Sure, boy. Go ahead. I'll be out after a while and see how you're making out."

Outside, Tommy grunted, "After a while hell! You'll beat me out there an' be watchin' every minute."

He got a horse, slipped a bridle over its head and a blanket on its back and led it to the corral fence to mount. Going out of town, he began to think. He muttered, "Supposin' I do find the gold an' give it to him?" He considered this for a moment, and suddenly a cold chill crawled down his spine. He was realizing with painful suddenness that wearing a star didn't necessarily make a man law-abiding. If a sheriff could be greedy, he could also be a killer.

Tommy half reined his horse around, but then resoultely went on. He could imagine what the Sheriff's story would be when

somebody stumbled over Tommy's body maybe a week from now. "The kid knew where the money was all the time. Someone else figured he knew and took to following him, followed him out here, killed him an' took it. Now I reckon we'll never find the gold. Too bad about the kid, but him an' his pa was just alike—crooked as a dog's hind leg."

Tommy topped a slight rise about two miles from town and looked back. He could see the dot that was a horseman, leaving. Several miles later, he looked again and the horseman was gone. "Cut around me," he muttered softly. "Took to Little Salt Wash, so's he could circle me an' get there first."

Tommy's self-sufficiency was rapidly evaporating. He hadn't stopped to think there might be danger, that maybe the Sheriff would kill for that much money. Now, if he went through with this, and he was guessing right about Crocker, Crocker would get the gold and Tommy the blame for concealing its whereabouts besides getting shot for his pains.

Fear crawled coldly through his body, set his scalp to tingling. "I could go back," he thought, "I could go back an' get them Wells Fargo fellers."

But he was missing something and he knew it. Someway, Crocker had to be trapped, had to be shown up for the scheming, crooked killer he was.

Tommy was passing Frank Sandusky's place. He could see Frank down by the corral fooling with a colt. Fear made him ride in for a word with Frank—fear and indecision and doubt.

Frank, grinning, called, "Hi, Tommy. Where you headed?"

"Out home." Tommy liked Frank, but somehow, facing him, he was never able to show that liking. He just stood there, his eyes on Frank, growing embarrassed. He had no errand, and when Frank asked him what was on his mind, what could he say? He grunted. "Well, I got to be going."

Frank said, "Wait," and his eyes were sharp and piercing. "Somethin's eatin' you, Tommy. You ain't runnin' away, are you?"

"Huh uh."

"You got to think of Susie, too, you know. You wouldn't want to leave her with that sour old Mrs. Crocker, would you?"

"Huh uh."

Panic now set Tommy's lower lip to quivering. Depending on yourself was fine, he told himself, but there was times when a man needed a little help. He eyed the gun, a Colt Single Action .45 at Frank's side.

He said, "Pa was out home that night. He took some of the chicken I had all ready to cook. Crocker found it where he was killed. So Crocker knows. But Crocker lied to the Wells Fargo men about it. He wants that money for hisself, but how's he gonna keep me from tellin' that I found it an' gave it to him? I can find it. Crocker knows I can. He's out there now, waitin' for me to come show him where it is."

Frank had started to grin as Tommy grew incoherent. Now his face turned very sober. "You know where Ron would have hid it, is that it?"

Tommy nodded. Frank untied his gelding from the corral fence. He said, "You give me about ten minutes start. Then you come. Now where is that gold hid?"

Without hesitation, Tommy replied, "I reckon Pa'd of put it in the magpie nest in that big cottonwood down by the crik," and watched Frank set spurs to his horse and ride dustily away.

TOMMY counted off the minutes. Five counts to a second, three hundred to a minute. When he had counted three hundred ten times, he rode again toward home.

He saw the Sheriff's black and white pinto in the yard, but there was no sign of Frank Sandusky. Tommy's face was bloodless as the Sheriff hailed him. His hands shook and his voice quavered and fear hung solid and tangible across the yard and was a wall between the two. Tommy muttered over and over as he approached, "Frank wouldn't let me down. Frank wouldn't let me down, I know he wouldn't, less'n somethin's happened to him." But where was Frank?

Crocker, grinning nervously, said, "You reckon you know where your pa'd have hid it?"

Tommy nodded and turned his horse. Crocker followed afoot. Tommy rode down into the creek bottom, straight toward the old cottonwood.

Crocker cried triumphantly, "That old magpie nest!" and could not keep the eagerness and greed from his voice. He said urgently, "Shinny up, kid, an' look."

Tommy rode his horse under an overhanging limb, his back to Crocker, grasped the limb and pulled himself up off the horse's back. He worked his way along the branch until he reached the crotch where the magpie's nest was. He could see the gold there, four canvas sacks, leather bound.

His back was tingling and he turned to look at Crocker. How long would Crocker let him live after he found the gold? Crocker's face was beet red, his eyes glittering, his hands shaking. He called, "Toss it down, kid. Hurry up!"

Tommy's voice shook. "It ain't here."

Crocker screamed at him, "You dirty little liar! You thievin' little son of—!" Crocker's gun was in his hand, raising.

Tommy figured Crocker had known from the way he froze he saw the gold, had known somehow from the way Tommy said, "It ain't here," that he was lying.

Tommy wanted to beg, to plead with the Sheriff. He could feel the tears of terror starting behind his eyes. He yelled frantically, "Don't! I'll throw it down," and he grabbed one of the heavy sacks and dropped it to the ground.

It seemed to calm the Sheriff. He said more quietly. "Now the others."

Tommy sobbed, "You're gonna keep it for yourself! But I won't let you! I'll tell. I'll tell the Judge!"

Crocker laughed hearshly. "No you won't. You won't tell nothin'."

Tommy cried, anger getting the best of his fear, "You didn't have to kill pa! He wasn't fightin' back!"

A quiet voice behind Tommy spoke, Frank Sandusky's voice. "No, he didn't, Tommy. But he was afraid if we took Ron alive, Ron'd tell where the money was. He could see by the way Ron tossed up his saddle that the gold wasn't on it. And Ron got right up. He knew Ron'd cached it somewheres."

Tommy sighed with relief. Frank had been here all the time, hiding in the willows.

Crocker screamed with rage, "You meddlin' fool. I'll kill you too!" His gun barked, and Frank Sandusky, lunging toward him, tripped on a waterlogged, overhanging root and fell heavily.

Tommy, thinking Frank was shot, launched himself from the tree, straight at the Sheriff. He struck the Sheriff's head with his chest and stomach and the wind went out of him with an explosive grunt. The boy dropped from there limply to the ground and lay in agony, gasping, choking for breath. Dimly he heard a shot, and then Frank was bending over him.

"Try an' breathe easy, Tommy. It'll pass in a minute."

Frank's bullet had smashed Crocker's elbow, and the Sheriff acted pretty sick all the way to town. The Wells Fargo men balked at giving Ron Eversman's son the reward, but the Judge insisted that it should be done.

Tommy could hardly make himself heard at first over all the arguing. The third time he said it, though, they listened incredulously. "I don't want it," he told them defiantly. "I reckon Susie an' me can get by without no help from nobody."

He remembered the help Frank had given him, before the words were hardly out of his mouth, and later, out in the street, he drew Frank to one side, clutching timidly at his sleeve. "I wasn't meanin' to make light of what you done for me, Frank."

"Forget it." It was Frank's turn to shuffle his feet awkwardly in the dust. "Lily Kehoe an' me are gettin' married next week, Tommy. We'd kind of like to take Susie, if you wouldn't mind. You could see her a lot. I'm always short handed an' I could use you whenever you ain't busy over home."

Tommy only nodded. He wouldn't trust himself to speak. Then the excitement over the prospect of working and earning real, hard money all by himself began to build up in him. After a while he looked up at Frank and grinned. He said, "Ron would like that. He was always sayin' that Susie ought to have a woman to look after her."

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Headache for the Boss

By DANE ZALE

Bill Wilton didn't carry his brains in his money belt!

A FEELING of relief swept over Bill Wilton as he unsaddled his horse, and turned the roan into the Rail G cavvy corral. It was good to be home safely after the long journey back from Rail City where the trail drive had ended. Carrying the five thousand dollars in cash he had received for the herd had made Wilton a bit skittish on the trip back to the ranch.

After all, the money wasn't his. It belonged to big, husky Matt Gill, owner of the Rail G. Wilton had been trail boss, and taken the herd through safely with the help of the eight hard-working men who formed the trail crew. At Rail City he had found a buyer for the herd, and succeeded in getting an even better price than Matt Gill had hoped the cattle would bring.

With the money in a money belt around his waist beneath his shirt Bill Wilton had headed back for the ranch alone, leaving the eight men to follow with the chuckwagon and the remuda when they were good and ready. All during the long miles that he had traveled the thought of being held up and robbed of the cash had ridden with Wilton, but now he had safely reached the ranch.

"That you, Bill?" a voice called from out of the shadows of the cloudy night.

There was no mistaking the deep tones of the man who came toward him from the direction of the ranchhouse. Wilton was sure that he would know Matt Gill's voice if he heard it anywhere.

"It's me, Boss," Wilton said. "I got back all right, and I have the money for the herd with me."

"Good!" Gill came closer, a big man wearing no hat and dressed in range clothes. "You get a fair price for the stock?"

"Five thousand cash," Wilton said.

"Five thousand!" exclaimed the owner of the Rail G. "Four was the best I hoped you might get for that herd, Bill."

Wilton glanced around him, suddenly uneasy. It was nearly midnight. The windows of the bunkhouse were dark and he knew the waddies of the home outfit were sleeping soundly. The two

men stood at the side of the barn beyond the corral. A big packing case rested on the ground near the barn wall and Wilton wondered what it had contained, for he was sure it was empty now.

"The rest of the crew should be back in a day or so," Wilton said, pulling up his shirt, and unbuckling the money belt. "I rode on ahead, knew you wanted the cash just as soon as you could get it."

He thrust his shirt tail back into his trousers. He wore leather chaps over his levis, an open vest. His gunbelt and his hat were on the saddle he had placed on the ground beside him. His face was young and strong and his blond hair seemed almost white in the shadows.

"I'll take that money!" a gruff voice said.

A tall man had suddenly risen to his feet from behind the packing case. His hat brim was pulled down so his eyes were in the shadow and a dark neckerchief hid the lower part of his face. The long barrel of the gun in his right hand was aimed at Bill Wilton's heart.

"Holdup!" snapped Gill angrily. "You sure have your nerve. All I've got to do is yell and my men will come tearing out and blast you down."

"You won't yell," said the masked man coldly. "If you do those waddies of yours will come rushing out of the bunkhouse to find a couple of dead men —and you'll be one of them, Gill."

WILTON realized the masked man meant just what he said. He could shoot down Wilton and Gill and get away with the money belt before the cowboys sleeping in the bunkhouse would be wide enough awake to learn what was going on outside. Doubtless the holdup man had a saddled horse hidden somewhere close by so he could leave the ranch in a hurry.

"Strange that you should know I was carrying so much money when I rode in here tonight," Wilton said, holding the money belt in front of him with both hands. "Unless you trailed me all the way back from Rail City."

"Never mind about that," said the masked man impatiently. "Hand me that belt and I'll be leaving."

Gill suddenly crouched and then lunged at the masked man. The long barrel of the Colt came down hard on the ranch owner's head. Gill dropped to the ground, unconscious from the blow, and sprawled there motionless.

"Foolish move on the Old—on Gill's part," said the masked man coldly. "Wouldn't try anything like it if I were you, Wilton."

"Don't aim to do anything foolish," Wilton said quietly.

He made no attempt to resist as the masked man snatched the money belt away from him. He just stood there waiting and watching.

"You won't get much fun out of that money," Wilton said.

The masked man covered Wilton with his gun as he backed toward the side of the barn, his figure growing dim as he faded into the shadows. Wilton picked up his gunbelt from the saddle and buckled it on. He kept listening for the thudding of a horse's hoofs and did not hear the expected sound.

"Thought so," he said softly as he put on his hat. "That hombre knew me and the boss a little too well for his own good."

Wilton made no attempt to rouse the men in the bunkhouse and get the Rail G men chasing after the robber. He knew that was just what the masked man expected him to do, and the trail boss had his own way of playing out this hand.

Finally Matt Gill moaned and then sat up. A feeling of relief swept over Wilton when he realized the ranch owner had not been badly hurt.

"He get away with the money?" Gill demanded, glaring at Wilton. "Why didn't you wake up the men and send them chasing after that sidewinder?"

"Didn't seem much use," Wilton said as he helped Gill to his feet. "Too dark to trail a man on a night like this. By the time we got saddled up and riding he would be so far away it just wouldn't

be worth all the bother."

"That sounds strange," Gill said coldly. "You wondered how the masked man knew you were carrying so much money. Maybe you told him—maybe the two of you planned the whole thing, Wilton."

"And maybe if I didn't like you so well I'd sock you on the jaw and knock you out all over again for saying that, Boss," said Wilton. "I'm not working with the masked man, but I know how to catch him."

"How?" asked Gill.

"I've got a feeling that jasper is somebody we both know," said Wilton. "Might even be one of the outfit. If he is, and we act like nothing has happened, it sure is going to worry him considerable." A thought struck the trail boss. "Are all the men here now—those of the home outfit, I mean?"

"Pete Lanning and Seth Doyle rode to town early this evening," Gill said. "Don't know if they got back yet. Didn't pay them no mind."

"All right," Wilton said. "You go back up to the house, and act like nothing has happened. I figure we'll know who stole the money by noon tomorrow. If we don't then you can believe I was working with the masked man and turn me over to the sheriff."

"Fair enough," said Gill. "I want to get that hombre. He sure gave me a headache."

Gill went on up to the ranchhouse. The owner of the Rail G was a bachelor, and there were no women or children at the ranch.

WILTON left his saddle in the harness shed and then headed for the bunkhouse. He found his bunk was empty. He removed his hat, boots and gunbelt and vest and turned in. All around him men were sleeping soundly and they did not awaken. Bill Wilton was tired and he soon was sleeping as heavily as were the other cowboys.

With the coming of dawn the cook started beating loudly on a dishpan to wake up the men. There were five of them in the bunkhouse besides Wilton. They started getting up and putting on their clothes and heading out to the pump to wash. Wilton saw that Pete Lanning and Seth Doyle were among those present.

"So you got back all right, Bill," Doyle said. He was a tall, sandy haired man. "No trouble?"

"No trouble," Wilton said. "Sold the herd in Rail City and brought the money home to the boss all safe and sound."

"Wilton is smart," said Lanning, who was a big man, with thin dark hair. "He wouldn't let anyone steal the Old Man's money."

"Wouldn't do them much good if they did," said Wilton. "I brought back five thousand dollars to the boss. Since I knew Gill was going to put the money in the bank I brought back five thousand-dollar bills and I have the serial number of everyone of them written down."

"Huh," said Doyle as he and Lanning listened. "Anybody who stole that money would be taking a long chance trying to change one of those thousand dollar bills around here."

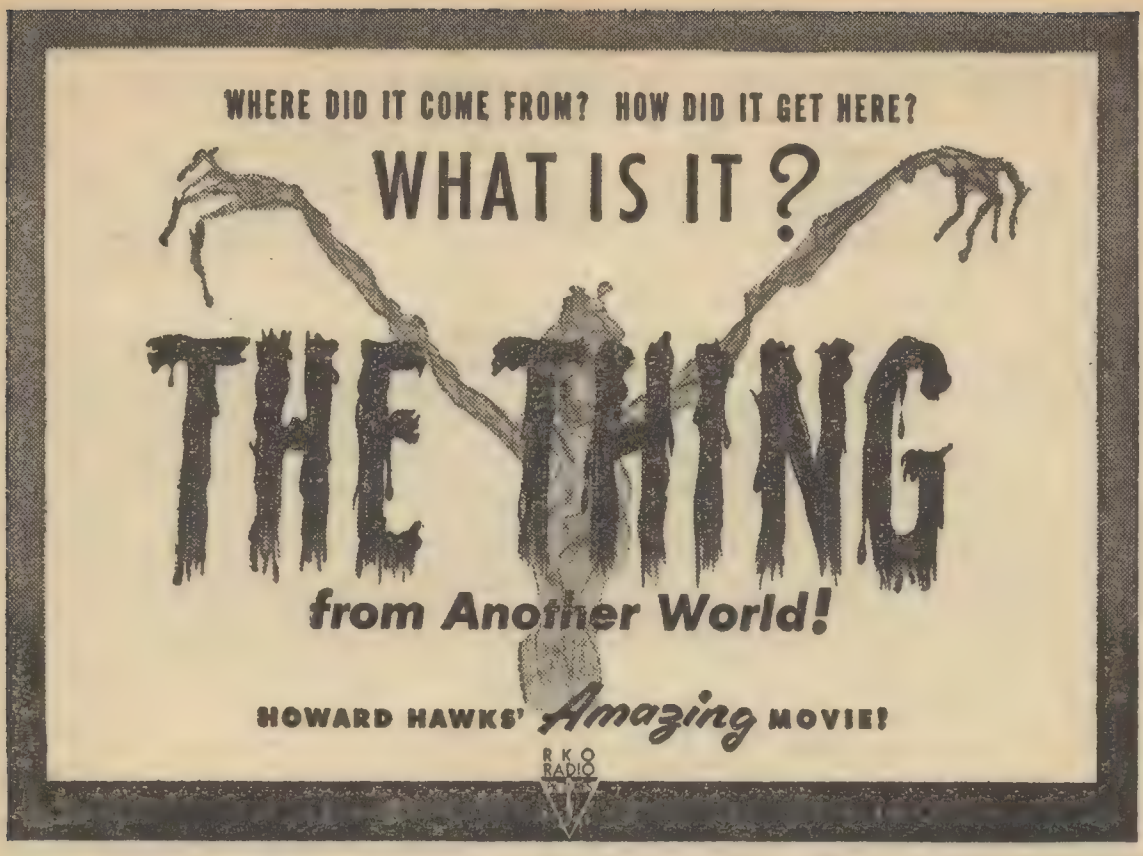
"He sure would," said Wilton, as he headed for the pump.

The ranch cook had allowed the men fifteen or twenty minutes to get dressed and washed and ready for breakfast. Now he appeared in front of the cook shack with the tin pan in his hand.

"Come and get it or I'll throw it away," he shouted, beating on the pan.

The cowboys headed for the cook shack and Matt Gill came down from the house and joined them, for the ranch owner always ate with his men. As they ate at the long table Wilton watched the men around him. He discovered that Pete Lanning apparently didn't have a very good appetite this morning. The big man appeared to have something on his mind.

When the meal was finished the men went to the corral to rope and saddle their horses and ride out for the day's work on the range. They all stopped at the harness shed to get their rigging on the way to the corral.



Wilton did not go with the others and he found a chance to speak to Gill alone. "Think I've found the man we want," he said. "Stick around and watch, Boss."

Lanning roped and saddled a horse and rode out of the corral as one of the other men held the gate open.

Lanning rode off and disappeared behind the barn.

"Come on, Boss," said Wilton, running toward the other side of the barn.

Gill followed close behind Wilton as they circled around the barn. They discovered Lanning had dismounted and was pulling something out from beneath a small haystack.

It was the moneybelt.

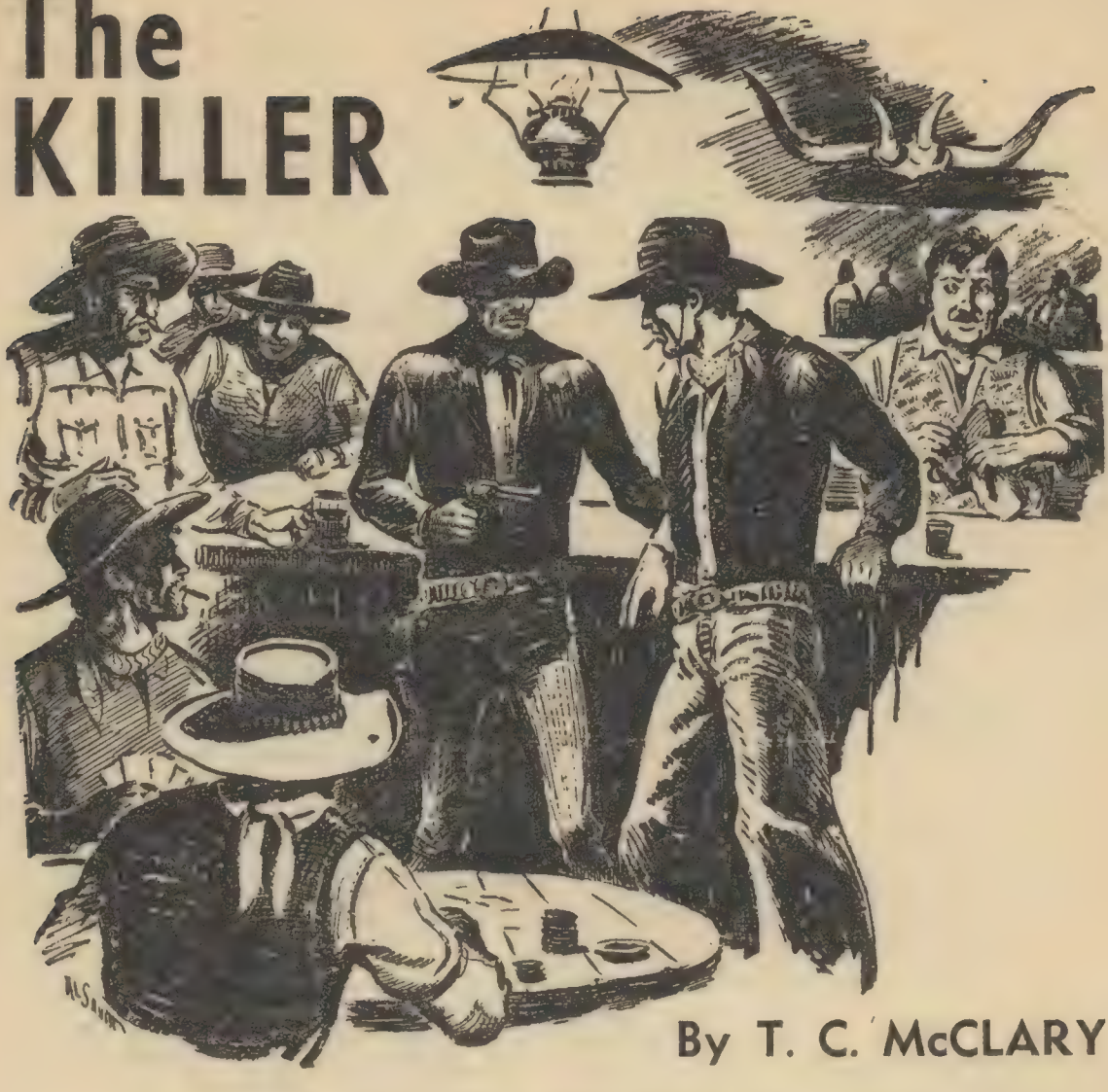
"So that's where you hid it last night, Lanning," Wilton said, covering the big man with his gun. "I knew you didn't get far, for I didn't hear the sound of a horse's hoofs. Looks like you aimed to leave for good this morning and take the money with you."

"All right," Lanning said sullenly. "You've got me. I planned to try and steal the money, soon as I saw you ride in last night, Wilton. Hid behind the packing case and waited. After I got the belt I hid it beneath the haystack. Aimed to stick around so no one would suspect me—but when you said the money was in thousand dollar bills and you had the serial numbers I figured I'd better get far away from here before I could spend any of the dinero."

"Trouble with you is you believe anything a man says, Lanning," said Wilton with a grin. "I figured it would be too dark for you to examine the money in the belt last night. Shucks, it is in bills of all sizes and I don't know the serial numbers off any of them, any more than you do."

"You were smart, Bill," said Gill, taking the money belt away from Lanning. The ranch owner grinned. "This is one time when I sure admire a right convincing liar!"

The KILLER



By T. C. McCLARY

When Rancher Steve Settler and a gent known as the Cicabo Kid get together—Boot Hill yawns!

ON HIS forty-fifth birthday, one of the fawning barflies asked him, "Cicabo, how many notches you got on your gun? I don't think you've got room for them all."

The Cicabo Kid's hand slipped to the smooth worn cherry butt of his old Sharps. He had one of the few Sharps pistols west of the Red, and two of the small, smooth nicks that his fingers touched were mute evidence that, in his hand, a Sharps was better than a Colt.

There were eighteen notches on that pistol, and after the first four, he'd only nicked the actual duels. He hadn't counted the greater number of men who went down in the confusion of general rows, shooting off posses, and the sundry incidents of rustling and such.

Now his mind went back over those fights one by one as he touched each notch, and for the first time in his life, he saw himself riding to smoking guns down the years. He saw the wild young Kid anxious to blaze a trail to hell and glory. He'd not been a killer then, but just a fellow feeling his oats and wanted the respect of men, and had a little too much pride when a slight was offered, or what looked like a challenge.

That second notch now, that had been Curly Dietrich, not a bad man, not even a trail buck, but just another wild kid like himself. He hadn't been a bad sort, there'd been no real bad blood between them. The argument had grown out of nothing but rot-gut liquor burning through men raw with summer's drought, and the insult had been given before they realized it, and their guns had blazed out of nothing but sheer pride. Neither of them actually wanted to kill the other. Neither of them wanted to die.

That fight had given the Kid his handle and the next two fights had been pushed at him to test him. And there, at the fifth notch, he'd already skipped two or three men who pitched out of their saddles when a posse cornered him, and he was no longer just a wild kid, but a tempering hardcase, with the tightness settling on his mouth and the sharp alertness a steady thing in his eye.

He had a name to keep up now, a reputation, and trouble had become his dish; it was part of the game. There had been a girl along the way—damned if he could recollect her name. Oh yes, it was Sarah. Sarah Albright, a good girl, and she'd almost gentled him, but he wouldn't bend his pride, and some saddle farmer named — named — oh yeah, Steve Settler, had run off with her. Probably just as well, but that was the only man in his life he had ever really hankered to kill, and the hate had stayed in him a long time, but he never had caught Steve.

THE game had taken a different twist after Sarah. He'd caught the bitter sweet taste of blood, and it was, he'd thought then, more satisfactory than the taste of a good woman's lips, and he had looked for his fights and picked his men, not just for the glory and the homage of the crowd, but for the thrill of killing another man.

And that has lasted until his twelfth or thirteenth notch, and then he'd found himself sated with blood and wearying of tinsel glory, and just wanting to be left alone. But the game had claimed him. The rest of the fights were just damned irritating; something he had to do to maintain a name that should need no proving. Those last five notches, well, four anyway, had left him cold as roping a calf at roundup would leave a working buckaroo. It was something to be done and he did it efficiently, but it was a chore. There was no additional glory in it, no satisfaction, nothing to be gained.

And now, standing there and feeling those notches on his forty-fifth birthday, he felt life's discontent and dissatisfaction corroding through him, and sudden as the raw, harsh sound of clanging iron, he was fed up with killing, with the fickle crowd's fawning homage, with the shallow friendship and tinsel glory and, with a game that had lost its excitement, and a life that held only a driving dissatisfaction.

He looked at the barfly and, if the man had been a tolerable gunhand, he'd have thrown the drink right in his face. But the hombre was just another crawfish ready to buy a drink in order to show he knew the Kid, and already going gray and nervous at the unyielding hardness of the Kid's expression.

So Cicabo just said, "How many notches? Well enough, coyote, enough for any man," and the crowd bored him and his drink had a stale taste, and all of the show put on in his honor had a phony ring.

He said, "Hell!" and the discontentment churned inside of him. He swung from the bar and walked out through the crowd without acknowledging a word or greeting, and got on his pony and rode up wind. He didn't give a damn where as long as it was new country, a new start, a new chance for a little peace and lazying. He was through with the whole works including his name.

But he still rode up wind from lifelong habit, and he still carried the Sharps of the Cicabo Kid.

He rode a long time, and the winds came steadily out of the hills, and then out of the

higher hills beyond them. He left the land of blazing sun and burning sands, life so dry and raw and meager it held no value, and he found himself in high hills where the grass was green and a man could breathe, and singing brooks in tall timber. This was a country locked away from the easy trails to travel, poor in money but mighty easy and peaceable in living.

The ranches here were owner operated, small, but neat, with damned few barons, but no man so poor he did not have a well built shack or better and enough water and fire and to eat. He crossed a high pass and stopped on a promontory that hung over a rolling park, the sun bright and golden upon lakes that were not dried out salt rings, and good timber towering high above cool shadows.

Plenty of everything and most of all, peace. The Cicabo Kid sucked a deep breath and thought, "It's been here all the time. Where in hell have I been?" and took back his given name of Kurt Schlagel.

He dropped down into the park watching a small ranch. Very small, probably not needing more than three men and the owner to tend it, but with timber and grass and meadows and hills, and a real lake and half a dozen streams. He'd known big barons down in the hot lands who didn't have as much. This fellow didn't have more than a hundred cows, but he had everything.

He drifted by the mouth of the ranch lane and saw a neat slab branded, Double S, and it crossed his mind that would be a nice ranch for Kurt Schlagel, and maybe he'd find a robust, buxom widow in this country to make the S double. He felt pretty good. The jaded weariness of life was passing. There was an urge in him to do things again, to get about the business of ordinary men, and forget his past, and find contentment in the friendship of solid, stolid hombres who would have frozen if faced by the Cicabo Kid. Almost, a song broke in his throat. Almost, his hard mouth relaxed in a man's simple grin.

HE HIT the town and it was just the kind of place he had expected. There was a tough street where the boys could let off steam on Saturdays, but it wasn't the main stem. The main stem had trees, and a bubbling sweet spring for a watertrough, and it had the smell of a place where respectable women could pass unmolested by remarks, and where they might look openly at a friend and smile, and where men touched their hats. Saddles and wagons all packed carbines, and the solid bodied men had a look of knowing how to use them, but the pistol look wasn't about many, and quite a few men didn't tote one.

Maybe the town smelled him out in secret, but he had the idea it took his word he'd been a herd trail foreman. That covered a heap of things without covering too much. No real gun king would stoop to that kind of work, and yet it gave reason for his hard looks. If the town guessed more, it let it ride. Many had come here to start over and found life here paid off better than the wild trail, and settled down to being good.

He took things easy for the first time in his life. He didn't have to sit with his back against a wall, he didn't have to keep his attention sweeping the bar mirrors. He'd never known he had nerves, but something relaxed inside of him now. He still slept with one gun hanging by his head and another between his boots. But he slept, that was the thing; sleep of a dead weary man who found a safe place to rest, and when he wakened it would be with a start, which he'd never done because he'd never before slept without his senses keyed and one eye and ear half open.

He sat in for small, two-bit and two-dollar poker he would have scoffed at a month before, and enjoyed it. He took jokes as jokes and not as insults, and men showed friendliness and readiness to like him, and a deeper respect for his store of trail-gained knowledge than they'd ever held for the Cicabo Kid. He got in some good hunting and enjoyed the ironic humor of not being hunted. He went salmon fishing and he'd never had as much sport at a rodeo.

He looked the country over and found plenty of place to nest, but no place as neat and ready to provide a man a lazy contentment as the Double S. He went back and looked at it from a distance. He circled it

half a dozen times. It was the apple of his eye, and the one place he made a point of not going in. He wanted that place and it might be hard to get it. He didn't want some gleam of his eye or question or tone of voice to give him away.

He went back to town and waited his chance until somebody brought the ranch name in. He said, "That log shack stuck under a mesa to northward?"

"No," the man told him. "You're thinking of Gus Detter's place. Double S belongs to Settler; it lies in an open sided coulee facing Sundown Notch."

"Settler," he repeated and felt the shadow of the past rise up within him. "I knew a fellow by that name once. Skinny as a rail. White-blond."

The talkative man grinned. "This one's solid as a wall and dark. Well, not black, but no light blond."

Well, there'd be nothing uncommon in that name at that time in the West, Schlagel thought. And it would kind of crowd coincidence. It was probably a different one. In any case, the Steve Settler he had known would have enough sense if they met to keep his look vacant and his mouth shut this long after. For Schlagel's part, his burning hate had long since gone. If Sarah was still alive, she was probably fat and bad tempered and had forty kids with jam smeared all over them. He could even feel her existence as a friendly bond for Settler, if it turned out to be the same one.

Cicabo wanted no more trouble, no more wearying violence, no more irritating angers over nothing. He wasn't burned out, not with that step and that quiet, deadly rhythm, but he had burned out a man's bloodlust and thirst for excitement, and this was a new life he was enjoying. Damned if he wasn't having the kind of full-hearted fun he'd missed in his youth. He didn't want to be big any more, and he didn't want to worry. He'd retired. Safe and in good health with his pride intact, and without any major rewards offered for him, and the enemies he'd made would not be likely to trail in here. Once in awhile he'd hear the Cicabo Kid's name mentioned, the way a gun king's prowess spreads out by grapevine, and he sit tight and listen to the stories with a grin, or if he was in the mood, he might rear up a little and get almighty pious about these lobo bad men.

HE DIDN'T meet Settler because Settler was north with a remuda of horseflesh he hoped to sell to the cavalry, and he took closer looks at Double S, falling more and more in love with the place. It caught the first slanting rays of sunup, and you could sit on your stoop and watch sundown through the notch for an hour after the rest of the valley was dark with night. That notch must run in a straight line a hundred miles or better clean through the Rockies.

Settler's old lady was a busy, chirrupting body, well stacked but not fat, always good natured. She didn't have forty kids. She had four, but they weren't smeared with jam. She walloped them like a mama bear does her cubs when they got fresh, and they took it rolling, and worshipped her. She made them mind their manners, but she didn't nag or scold over natural things, and he figured that was about the same way she'd be with her husband. But it took a mighty good man to bring that out in a woman. Judging from his place, and the looks of his stock, this Settler was that kind of man. It was going to be hard to move him. But in a pinch, Schlagel still had an ace in the hole. He could let out a hoot and the Cicabo Kid would be there to side him. Just if need be, of course. And just that one time more.

Then Settler came back and it was the same one. Woodstock introduced them at the hotel bar. Woodstock said, "Schlagel, this is Settler who owns the Double S. He's a smart trader. Don't let him talk you into buying that extra S!"

Settler's square face cracked in a square man's hard put grin. "That's no extra S," he said. "That's for Sarah." He put a questing, direct blue gaze at Schlagel. He had changed a lot, and he knew it and Schlagel showed no recognition. He was man enough to remind him of the past forthrightly.

Schlagel nodded and signaled up drinks on himself. "Figured mebbe you was a man I knew once, but you don't look like him," he

allowed. "Same name too. Only man I ever knew lost the grapevine in his travels."

"Maybe he changed his name," Settler suggested.

"No, I don't think he would have. Not that man," Schlagel said. "Maybe I wouldn't have thought that at the time, but I can see now he knew what he wanted to do and he did it the only way he could. Sometime there's only one way to do a thing."

Settler soaked that statement in and used the drink as excuse to switch his gaze. Schlagel figured he'd said that pretty well. It gave Settler both reason and warning to keep his mouth shut and leave the past alone. And it gave a spur to any future negotiations on the ranch. If Settler had good sense, he'd sell when he got the chance at a fair price. Fair as Schlagel saw it, of course. If he got stubborn, he'd have Schlagel's last sentence in mind. The Cicabo Kid that Steve Settler had known was mighty quick to do a thing he'd set his mind on, this iron gray man had all of the old steel in him, but harder for the time in cooling.

Woodstock stood his drink and drifted over to join a game and Settler leaned on the bar and asked carefully, "Traveling through?"

"Was, but ain't," Cicabo told him. "I've seen the light and aim to root. This is a mighty purty country. Right friendly and peaceable. Purty sundowns, too."

Settler lifted his head an inch as if listening behind what Cicabo had said. "Gets a mite colder than the border country," he said. "Man's not used to it gets kind of fed up toting wood."

"Summer's hell one place, winter another," Cicabo chuckled. "Takes a little roughness to make a man appreciate the smooth. Always kind of figured that about living. Man don't appreciate being alive until he's looked death in the eye."

"Knew the Cicabo Kid once," Settler grunted. "Wonder if he ever thought of things that way."

"Well, I knew him too," Schlagel answered, and lifted his red liquor against the light to study its color. "Knew him middling well, and I dare say you'd have to answer both ways for him. He looked death in the eye often enough, but never the same way as the man who breasted him."

Settler turned his face. He was doing a good job of masking his feelings, but worry had cut his expression deep into his face. "What was the difference?" he asked.

"Nobody who breasted the Kid ever had a real chance," Cicabo noted with an echo of his old pride. "He was a dead duck and he knew it when he looked into the Kid's eye. There was no maybe about it. It was a sure thing."

"What about the Kid? Two guns fire two ways," Settler said.

"The Kid took the chance," Cicabo nodded. "But the man with the other gun never got a clean shot. The Kid was too fast. He might pink the Kid, he might even drop him for good, but his own hash was settled and he knew it, and that did more to slow his own draw and spook his shooting than even getting hit."

"You'd been one of those other men, what would you have done?" Settler murmured.

"I'd have been careful not to cross the Kid," Cicabo said, grinning. "I'd have figured it was better to have him for a friend."

THEY had another drink and then Settler found decent excuse to leave, drifted, forgetting he had a supper date with Woodstock. Woodstock learned he'd dusted out of town and let out a squawk about the engagement, giving Schlagel sign of the disturbance he had caused in Settler. He stood alone at the bar, drinking slowly and enjoying this, liking his new role of playing smooth and easy. He must have put the devil's own fear into Steve Settler. Well, he had his chance now, or would have shortly, to buy off the old score and still save face when Schlagel would make his offer to buy into the Double S. If he behaved, they might even remain partners if Sarah minded her business. Might even be a nice deal, having a partner's wife to keep a place pretty and tidy without having to be saddled by a woman of your own. Might even be a soft spot in her for the Cicabo Kid—those memories a woman never completely buries.

Cicabo gave his hard, cold smile and poured another drink. "Damned if I ain't

been missing things not being pious and peaceable as a banker!" he considered. "Why hell, it is one-two-three. He takes me in, or he just takes me. He won't put me in wrong here. He wouldn't want to admit he'd run out of a personal fight, even fifteen years back. If he does talk, he is opening the old score, not me, and men will remember that in my favor when the showdown comes."

He chuckled and lifted his glass to himself. He thought, "Cicabo, it is good to have you as a friend, but keep out of sight. I do better his way, and it don't make so many enemies."

He made a point of speaking well of Settler after that. When Steve hit town, he made a point of buying him a drink and showing the town his readiness to be friendly. The man had the respect of the community, there was no doubt of that, and sometimes Cicabo's old vanity and pride would rise and he would be tempted to put the sharp cut of his opinion on the man he once had called a coward, but he was playing as cold and impervious a slick game now as once he had played at violence. Building Settler up would stand well for Cicabo either way. If he went in partners with him, it made it look all friendly, and his own high regard for the rancher would spread Settler's virtues over him. If Settler got stubborn or wild and told who Cicabo was, he would have to explain the old score between them, and when Cicabo killed him, men's reactions would be tempered by the fact that clearly, Cicabo had wanted to forget the matter along with the handle he didn't use any more. The old bad blood had been brooding in Settler, and he had thrown it in Cicabo's face and it would be an affront which called for gun settlement. The town might not love the gun king for the killing and after learning who he was, but it would not Vigilante him out of the community.

He took things easy with Steve Settler too. He didn't rush him, didn't crowd him. He gave him time, and rope, and used subtlety, so that the definite offer of partnership could come from Settler instead of him. He spoke well of the ranch, he lingered on the theme of its sundowns, he mentioned looking around for a partner, preferably a family man, to offset his own loneliness. But never once during the summer did he try to pin Settler down.

And still, Steve Settler knew precisely what the deal was, and how it would look to the community, and the cost if he failed to make the offer. Knew it so well that his firm fleshed face was turning sharp and angular, and his eyes were sleepless, and he was losing weight.

Then roundup came and the wild calls of buckaroos slammed back and forth across the valley, and the dust of the gather hung over a different place each day. In town, the hide and tallow works was running full blast day and night and raising its fatty stink, and freighters were arriving for them to haul the tallow off through the mountains, being sure to be there by roundup's end, which was the payoff and the big day.

This was the day that the year's grudges were settled if they had gone that far, that the range took a look at itself and summed up its changes and prospects for the next year, that new graze and shelter and boundary agreements were reached, and that old deals were concluded and new ones agreed on. The whole range was in town for forty-eight hours of fun and riot now, and anything that happened had the whole range for judge and jury. This was the day Cicabo figured Steve Settler should make him the partnership offer.

He began pressing the point in smooth, veiled terms just after noon, never letting it get to a point of direct resistance or stubborn temper on Settler's part, but dropping it, then coming back to it, hazing Settler's decision into the bag just as he'd haze a wild horse into a trap. All that time he was buying the drinks, boosting Settler, lean hard face as good naturedly smiling as he could make it.

MAYBE the range thought his eyes were smiling too. They were bright enough, and crinkled at the corners. They splintered light like diamonds. But Steve Settler saw down into those eyes, and what he saw was not Kurt Schlagel, but the Cicabo Kid, and a score that was old, but still excuse for

shooting a man if an argument ever offered chance.

Saw that and saw the still-flexible steadiness of Cicabo's hand, and noted that he drank only with his left hand, even though he was apparently honest about settling down and holding to the name of Kurt Schlagel. He knew then the reason that smile was so easy for Cicabo's hard lips. The glory and the homage the crowd slavers upon a gun king was missing here, but Cicabo had found something more important, the mastery and power a man holds by sheer words.

The pastel light of evening spread through the dust boil of the street outside and every owner of the range was crowded into the high spirited confusion of the hotel bar, and Cicabo broke off talk of the partnership when he had Settler dead cornered. They were standing at the end of the bar and Cicabo stretched his left arm and let his right hand fall careless above his gun butt, and looked out lazily into the evening light.

"Almost sundown," he allowed. "Time for a man to know what next year looks like and have his plans salted and cooking. Always figured sundown the time of day men should know just where they stand, so they know whether to laugh or walk softly through the night."

Steve cracked a putty-like smile and said, "What's wrong with sunup?" for something to say.

"Sunup is when you find and figure up the last night's damage," Cicabo smiled. "Think back on your life, Steve—most of the troubles and most of the risks happened after sundown."

His eyes splintered rough humor at the rancher and he reached a cigar from his vest pocket with his left hand. "Those are mighty purty sundowns from your home stoop, Steve. Man could almost sit out there and see himself going west before his time came."

Steve said, "Yeah," uncomfortable, downright cold inside, but stubborn and trying desperately to find a way to evade the issue. A boy came in with word that his wife wanted him, and he moved through the jostling, loud talking crowd for the lobby door with relief.

She stood at the foot of the stairs that ran up to the porch and quarters reserved for the rancher's wives to gather, and whatever was on her mind, she forgot it when she saw her husband. She knew him too well. She read the desperation beneath the iron mask of his face.

She moved a step forward to meet him. She put a hand up to the second button of his shirt. "Steve," she murmured, low of tone and worried, "he's forcing that deal on you!"

He tried to smile, felt the nonsense of it, and lifted his big shoulders and let them fall. "It is that or fight, I guess," he muttered. "Maybe a fight would be better."

She went white. She knew the circumstances as well as he did. She cried out, but for his ears alone, "Oh Steve, sell him the place if it will end this! We can always find another."

"And run again?" he asked. He smiled bitterly, and shook his head. "We did that once and the fight still caught up with us, Sarah. No, you can't run out on your past."

"He'd make a sieve of you in a fight!" she breathed hatingly. "Steve, you wouldn't stand a chance!"

He was looking somberly at the floor. He went dead still, then lifted his head. Suddenly he remembered Schlagel using that same phrase. The hollowness under the surfaces of his eyes filled with solid color. The red of mixed but violent emotions streaked his face.

She clutched him and pressed the side of her face against his chest. "Steve, he's nothing but a common killer!" she cried against him. "Don't cross him. He'd just like you to give him the chance!"

He ran his calloused hand over the smooth plaits of her hair. He gave a man's gentle press upon the tanned flesh of her neck.

He said, "Don't fret," and he was sure of himself. He gave the top of her head a quick, embarrassed kiss and turned from her. Watching him cross back to the saloon doorway, it struck her odd that at a time like this she would notice that he was such a big man.

He moved back through the crowd to stand at the bar and call out robustly,

"Friends, this is something this range should hear."

MEN gave a few quips, but the confusion of noise sank into the thick waves of dusty tobacco smoke. Sundown's crimson light was slanting through the row of upper windows, showing the friendly readiness of the whole range to share in whatever Steve Settler wanted to tell them.

"Cicabo, here," Steve called when silence fell, and laid his left hand on Schlagel's shoulder, "has been honing to become my pardner, and he wants the deal so bad, I figure maybe he'd even pay a fair price."

There were deep chested chuckles and Cicabo, who had stiffened with alarm at something he was not quite sure of, relaxed and grinned.

"Yessir, boys, he wants that deal real downright bad," Steve went on. "So damned bad that if I didn't give it to him, he'd get mighty ornery, and either he'd tell you, or I'd have to, the old score the Cicabo Kid holds against Steve Settler, and how he swore fifteen years back to shoot me like a dog, front or back, first chance."

Cicabo had stiffened now, like a ramrod, but he had not moved because Steve's gun was pushing into his side hard. He knew what his first alarm had been—Steve had called him Cicabo. But he had missed cutting full sign on it in following Steve's friendly tone. It is a hard thing to be surprised at the use of a name you've used for years.

Maybe the crowd had caught the name first time in the same way. Noting it, yet not coming conscious of it, until Steve made it plain. Now the grins jellied on men's faces, and then dropped away, leaving their eyes keen, their mouths suddenly hard, as they put the stories of the Cicabo Kid's gun handiness into the personal terms of a fellow rancher's plight.

Steve said, his voice going flat and metallic, "I want to say one more thing that Cicabo told me not long back. No man ever had a chance against him, he said. They were good as dead when he looked at them. Now we'll put it the other way."

Cicabo looked straight into Steve Settler's eyes and saw the implacable cold determination he himself had turned on so many men. He was going to be spilled open wide before he could even touch his gun if he made a wrong yap or move. He needed his long trail's case hardening to hold a mask on face and voice.

"Why, Steve," he drawled, "you've done told something on yourself I was ready to forget, and you've let it worry you into telling something that ain't true. A man grows tired of always having to watch his back and keep his hand near his gun, and I had just figured to forget all that and settle down, and it should be clear to all I been trying to be friendly."

The impact of that ran through the growing antagonism of the crowd and froze it. Steve was their friend, and his word was good, but come to think of it, there'd been no sign any of them knew that Cicabo meant to use a gun whip, and maybe Steve's worries had given this a funny look.

STEVE'S honest eyes were hard as granite. Not an expression altered in his face. He said, "Cicabo, these men won't fall for that. Not when I tell them you were angling for my wife when I dropped my loop on her and married her and ran away. No man with the pride of the Cicabo Kid would even want that other man for a real friend and pardner!"

The sense of this spread out through them in solid waves. Cicabo looked around and he could feel their recent liking draw off from him, leaving the bare, corrosive hate of all good men for wanton killers. Many of these men had killed another man out of necessity, but they had never boasted of it; and they would carry the memory in secret shame to their dying day.

A heavy freighter's rough face went mean, and he rasped, "The Cicabo Kid, eh? The damned sidewinder who knocked off my brother driving a gold stage!"

A cowprod with a working face barked, "He shot a pard of mine for crowding him when my pard was so drunk he could have flattened him with a breath!"

Wherever Cicabo looked he could see the surging violence of old memories. The black

and burning memories of family or friends who had bucked him and paid, or whose lives had been altered by some distant act of his; in one case a rustling, in another a gold theft. Some of these things were first hand, some more distant, but all of them spread formed into the solid force of the hatred of good men for men who kill for glory or the lust of blood or for profit, and the force stripped off the veneer of his retirement mood and showed hileft all of the hardness, the brutality, the callousness of his past showing.

He looked back at Settler and said wickedly, "You've got the drop on me. There is no fight this time, Steve."

"Those other hombres never had a chance," Steve repeated. "Your own words. I'd never have a chance but this way."

Cicabo searched him and broke out a breath of contemptuous mockery. "You couldn't do it. You ain't got the cold guts to shoot a man who ain't able to draw!"

The crowd muttered, like the muttering of a herd before a stampede. But Cicabo was the Cicabo Kid again. He stood cautious, but unwavering, arrogant and contemptuous of them all. His mouth was twisted with scorn for decent men, and his eyes were filled with the cruel pride of his old affront.

Steve's face was like cast iron while he fought his own conscience, and then the mask broke and the implacable determination went out of him and he said on a spending breath, "No, I guess not," and snagged out Cicabo's gun.

Cicabo gave a harsh note of laughter and read the score and said mockingly, "Be on your way by sundown, eh? Well, there'll be other sundowns some place, Steve. Think of that when you sit on your stoop of evenings."

He drifted a gaze of cold, arrogant disdain across the crowd, hitched at his belt and moved dog-stiff of gait for the front doors. He put his left hand on top the batwing to open it. Maybe it was what warned Steve through the taut silence.

Cicabo used the push to measure his balance and catch his fine rhythm. He dropped in a corkscrew, his hand darting to his shirt and coming out with something small and wicked. He caught the look in Steve's eyes before he shot because he aimed between them.

He saw the look, and it was cold and merciless and determined, and maybe that slowed his pull the fraction of a second that it took Steve to fire and spin him against the flaming sundown. He fired too, but the shot went wild and only creased Steve Settler, and Cicabo lurched as Steve's second shot tore through his middle, and he swung with grotesque slowness, paralyzed but knowing the cold feel of death as he sank into its rising shadows.

THE crowd stood over his body while somebody fetched a bottle of whiskey for Steve's head, and the freighter grunted through the silence, "Now what the hell, he could have ridden out safe and sound. Why did he try that?"

"Pride," the cow prod said. "It was the same pride that made him kill my pardner for a drunken man's crazy staggering. There wasn't even any glory in it."

A woman's sharp steps raced over the stoop. The crowd opened and Sarah Settler threw herself upon her husband and clung to him sobbing, unabashed.

"Oh, my dear, my darling, you're all right!" she cried.

He pressed her head reassuring and looked over it out in the spoking bands of dusk-filled light. "All right," he nodded with a somber but solid ring in his deep chested voice. "Better than I've been for fifteen years, Sarah. He had it coming, but I'm glad he had that second gun. We'll go home now. We can get there while the sundown is still in the notch."

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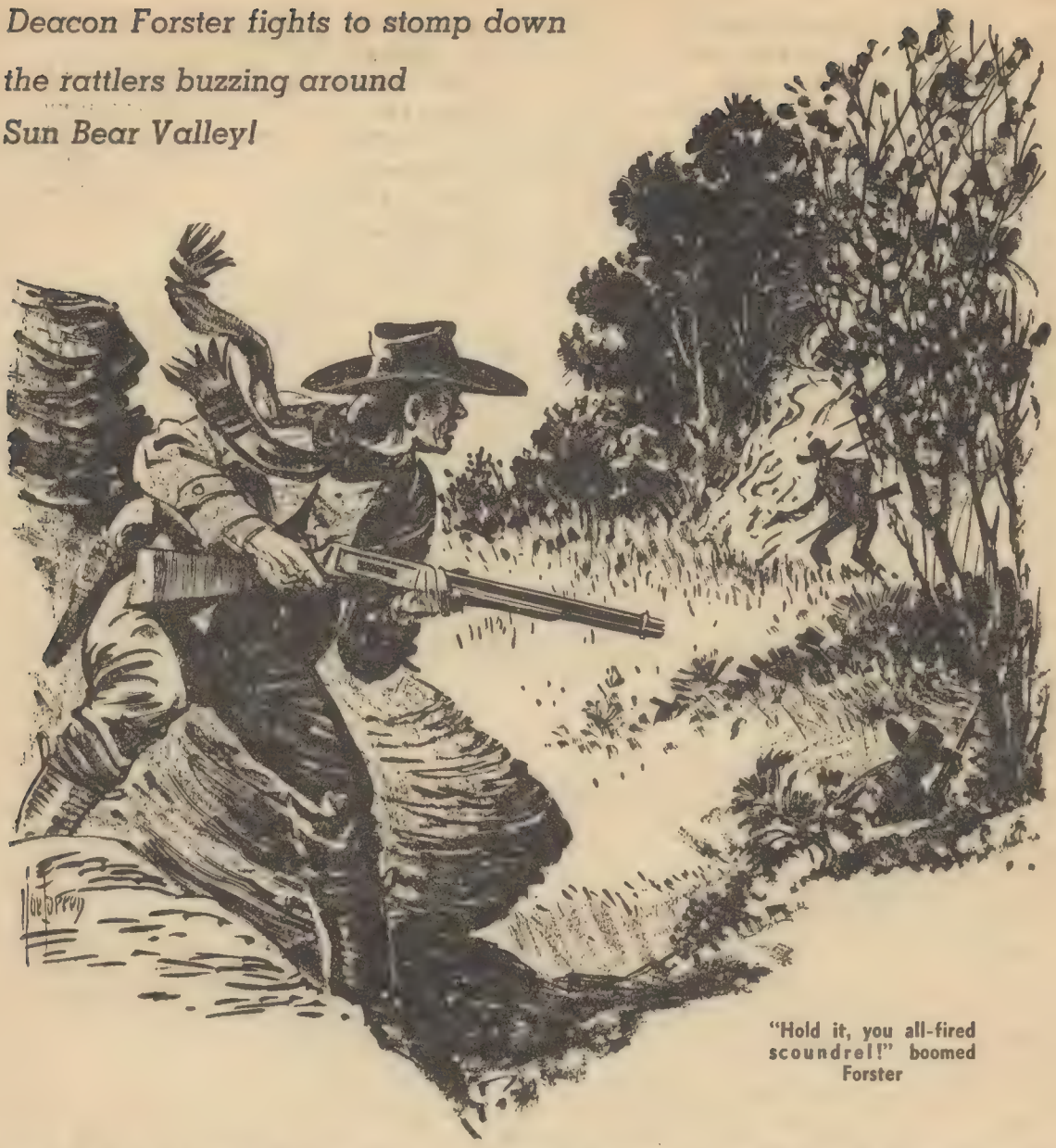


"Hold it, you all-fired scoundrel!" boomed Forster

DAUNTLESS THE PIONEER

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

DAL BALDWIN, first settler at the rugged Sun Bear Valley country of Wyoming, sat on a windfall log and applied a whetstone to the bit of his axe. The sun was starting its final dip, sending waves of gloriously tinted dancers flashing across the westerly mountain faces.

Suddenly Dal was startled by a shot, but he soon smiled softly, for his timber cruising pardner and neighbor, little Doc Carson, was out hunting up a young buck for fresh meat.

The smile was quickly erased from Dal's

mouth when in sharp succession two heavier, booming shots echoed—shots from Doc's old frontier fort-five-ninety Winchester.

"Distress signal!" Dal gasped, leaping to his feet. As he reached for his own carbine, he paused. Three shots had sounded, yet when he came to think back, that first shot hadn't come from Doc's big rifle.

Dal snatched up his Winchester and whirled. He was prompted to fire two answering shots, but held his fire. That first shot, from a lighter rifle, filled him with misgiving. There was trouble loose in the woods. Doc wouldn't have fired his signal if he didn't need help.

As he pushed through underbrush, Dal's heart picked up tempo. Doc was his closest friend. Doc and his wife, Marta, were the first neighbors to come to Dal and Mary Baldwin, way back in their earliest pioneer days.

Since those early days, before the coming of more neighbors, the Baldwins and the Carsons had battled many hard times, fraught with danger.

Dal and Doc were cruising for suitable timber for the beginning of the new government bridge—a permanent span promised them and authorized by Kent Ralston, the State's new Governor.

Dal came to a narrow plateau and was on the point of raising his carbine, to fire, and hope for an answering shot from Doc when suddenly, ahead, and slightly below, he glimpsed a man moving slantwise over an old slide.

It was on the tip of Dal's tongue to challenge the stranger, to halt him, but the man vanished from view.

Quickly Dal recovered. He was striding forward to start down the decline when a stir, almost directly below his vantage point, arrested him. Then his heart leaped as he heard a voice sound, a low moan.

"Doc!" he gasped, and leaped on down to smash into a huckleberry fruit clump where Doc lay huddled, his old rifle out a few feet from his twisted body.

DAL BALDWIN placed his arms about the little man's shoulders and was raising him, when Doc called out, and groaned with pain. "Not that-a-way, Dal—boy!" he said huskily. "It's my left laig. Bone's broke, I think. Best have a—look—see."

Dal winced as he laid Doc's slight form down and turned. Then a wave of admiration for Doc pounded in his brain. Despite his hurt, Doc had applied a tourniquet of buckskin over a twisted stick, half way up to his left hip.

"Guts!" Dal's lips framed the term of praise.

Little Doc must have suffered terrifically from pain and shock, yet he had persevered alone to apply the tourniquet. Dal could hear the gabble of a small spring-fed waterfall at a higher level.

"Hang an' rattle, Doc," he called out. "I'll bring water in my hat. Don't try to move."

Quickly Dal found the catch basin below the small falls. He drank a mouthful or two of the cold water before filling his hat and hurrying to slide down to Doc's level.

Doc drank eagerly, then Dal bathed the little homesteader's forehead.

"Eh-h-h-h—plumb soothin', Dal—boy," Doc groaned. "Now you'd best ease—the tourni' some. Watch 'er, though. She starts pumpin', tighten 'er up."

Dal shuddered as he did as directed. It was plain that this was a gunshot wound.

As he eased the tension on the tourniquet, he heard Doc moan with relief. But Dal shortly reapplied the thong. It was not safe to keep it slack for long.

"I've got to tote you down to the camp, Doc," Dal said. "You'll rest there overnight, then it's back to Sun Bear. I'll have the doc brought in pronto from Cody."

It was fortunate that Doc had brought along his small trail axe in a sheath on his belt. Dal took this and set to work to strip stout bark from a nearby tree bole.

He came back and carefully laid Doc's wounded limb, from ankle to hip, in the cupped bark. He made fast ties with thongs and his own boot laces.

Next he cut poles and fashioned an Indian travois carrier. Twilight had blotted out all shadow shapes as Dal loaded Doc aboard the travois and started down to the glade in the forest below where their horses were teth-

ered. From time to time little Doc called out in pain as he was unavoidably jounced.

At last Dal heard a horse snort. They were at camp, and quickly Dal built up a fire and shoved the lard pail coffee pot on to heat up.

"Could you go for some grub, Pardner?" Dal asked, as Doc sipped strong black coffee.

The little man shook his head. "No thanks, Dal—just the—coffee. Eh-h-h—but you've a job ahead of you, son. Git my trail kit. There's antiseptic I done fixed up myownself—mixture uh sheep dip an' turpentine. Got to git it onto the wound."

In the light of the flaming campfire, Dal administered to Doc's medical needs, under the little man's directions.

"Now pass me that bottle uh herb juice uh Marta's," Doc asked weakly. "Grounds for—uh—divorce in that bottle, but it packs a lift, if'n a feller don't choke to death—gettin' it down."

It was hard for Dal to mask a smile as he reached for the bottle of home-dispensed herb tonic.

"Better take a double shot, Doc," he urged. "We can't take a chance trying to get out tonight. Here, I'll hold the back of your haid, in case you start gaggin'."

Doc gulped; he coughed and retched, but persevered, then settled back, wheezing, gasping long moments until normal breathing was restored.

"Uh—liquid—hell, for shore, Dal," he breathed brokenly, "but she works. I feel warmer, from haid to toes."

Dal began to question his friend.

"I got a glimpse of the hombre who bushwhacked you, Doc," Dal said. "Did you glimpse him at all? Figure he might have been on the trail of a buck an' threw down when you stirred?"

"No, Dal, this was no accident. There were no deer tracks. I was watchin' the man a minute afore he whirled an' opened fire. He was on my trail, deliberate."

"You sure, Doc?" Dal asked sharply. "I can't figure who'd want to attempt to murder you."

"I'd reckernize him agin, Dal," Doc resumed. "While I watched him, wonderin' what he was up to, I noticed he used his right hand all along, partin' brush, an' the like but—"

"Yeah, go ahaid, Doc. Tell some more," Dal prompted, as Doc's voice trailed out.

"But when he handled his carbine to—shoot—Dal, he—he shot left handed."

"Which means?" Dal questioned.

"Which means he has either a bad right eye or no right eye at all, Dal."

Dal started. He was amazed, proud of Doc's keen wits.

"I got a idea, Dal," Doc went on weakly. "I figure Curt Hanson, who bucked the new governor at election time, is on the prod again. This attempted bushwhackin' could be a sign we're in for more trouble before we git the new bridge—"

Doc's voice trailed out, and Dal dropped quickly to his knees, but a slow smile gathered at his mouth. Doc was breathing steadily, regularly.

"Plumb stove up," Dal said softly.

He rose and walked off to the horses. Tomorrow at dawn he would rig up a pole sling litter between the saddlers and tote Doc down to the valley. It would be slow going, but Dal figured it was the only means of getting Doc out.

Once at the Valley Beyond, he would send Phil Cody riding hard for the doctor.

Throughout the balance of the night, his carbine handy, Dal sat and smoked, or catnapped, while Nature and Marta Carson's liquid dynamite herb tonic kept Doc in a fairly sound sleep.

The night passed without further misadventure. Dawn, heralded by the wild matins of the birds, found Dal building fire. By the time Doc stirred, the tang of sizzling sidemeat blended fragrantly with the scent of good bubbling coffee.

Within an hour, laid on a bedroll on the slung poles, little Doc groaned, as they swung along down an old elk trail, bound for the Valley Beyond.

Never was the tang of birch-wood smoke more welcome to Dal Baldwin than now as it coiled from the roofjack of the Cody home.

Dal found Phil Cody at work in his yard. Quickly Dal told of Doc's wounding and the urgent need of medical aid.

"I'll be riding inside half an hour, Dal," Cody answered. "I can snatch a bait of food an' have my wife rig up some trail chuck. Bring Doc to the home, huh?"

But Dal shook his head. He was anxious to get Doc down to Marta.

Shortly, he was leading the horses slowly up to the cleft, at the height of land between the Valley Beyond and the beautiful Sun Bear Valley. Before noon, Dal slowly led into Doc's own yard.

SHORTLY, tears streaming down her cheeks, Marta was helping Dal carry Doc in, to lay him on his bed.

"Dang little ol' coot, yuh," Marta half sobbed as she held Doc close to her ample bosom. "Seems like you can't keep out uh trouble unless I'm along with you the—whole—time."

Doc batted his eyes, reached around and patted one of Marta's moist cheeks.

" 'Tain't like you to be spillin' all them tears, Marta honey," he said. "I'd ruther you r'ared back on yore hind laigs an' sounded off proper."

A queer little chuckle escaped Marta. Dal was touched. Marta's tongue could indeed be sharp, but none knew better than Dal and Mary Baldwin how much worse was her bark than her bite.

Dal took his leave. He knew that Doc was in most excellent hands. At his home yard, he found Mary feeding her ducks and chickens. She whirled sharply at his approach. Her eyes widened, and her lovely face paled.

"Why, Dal, darling, what's happened? You weren't due back for two or three days."

Dal slipped an arm about her and held her close. Slowly he told the story of Doc's wounding. Mary shuddered.

"Again? No, Dal, surely it was an accident!" Mary's voice was broken.

"You had any visitors?" Dal asked.

Mary started sharply.

"Why, yes, Dal, but the day you and Doc left. A stranger called. Looked like a saddle tramp—swarthy man who asked the way to the Boxed D ranch. Also asked about Doc Carson."

"Anythin' strange about him, hon?" Dal questioned.

Mary's face twisted, her eyes shutting tightly a moment or so. Suddenly she started.

"Why, yes, now that you mention it, Dal, there was—his right eye. It—well it's been hurt. Looked like it had a ripe cataract. He—"

"That's him! That's the jasper who gunshot Doc!" Dal exploded. "He wasn't lookin' for no ridin' job to the Boxed D. He's one uh Hanson's jiggers. I wouldn't be surprised if'n he—"

Dal was cut off by a wild yell from his son Jim up in the big barn's haymow.

"Smoke, dad!" Jim called. "Comin' from in back of ol' Eagle Peak!"

Dal swung away from his wife, and hurried to climb the wall ladder to the mow. He quivered as he watched the black smoke coil skyward.

"Fired the timber," he said crisply.

Mary called up to him.

"Reckon that's part uh the job One-eye was sent to do, hon," Dal answered. "Spite on the part of Hanson—a cheap way of tryin' to block our progress at the bridge."

Down on the ground again, Baldwin strode back and forth, then came to a stop beside Mary.

"There ain't a thing we can do to stop that fire, Mary," he said. "Don't seem like the act of a sane human critter. It'll delay us for sure, but the worst of it is, it'll destroy a great stand uh timber we'd figured on loggin' off in a year or two."

"Any danger of the fire spreading to the valleys, Dal?" Mary asked.

Dal was slow to answer. He shook his head. "It'd burn itself out if'n it hit the open, hon. Grass is too green," he said reassuringly.

But Mary was not convinced that her husband was truly speaking his mind.

Dal turned away, shrugging. Throughout their years of homesteading, the settlers of Sun Bear Valley had fought many an enemy, natural and human, but they had forged ahead, winning their battles with dauntless spirit—the spirit of the pioneer who refused to accept defeat.

In strong communal spirit, they fought and worked together, accepting the frowns of nature, along with her smiles.

Not until the past year had politics entered the scene of their endeavors. They had every assurance of government help now in the new bridge and a good road out, but Governor Ralston had strong enemies, chief of whom was Curt Hanson, head of a land development company which had its own plans.

It had been Hanson's forces that had broken the river dam, causing the washout of the old bridge in a flash flood. Now Dal was sure Hanson was again at his work—behind the attempted bushwhacking of little Doc, and the start of that timber-destroying fire. But it might be difficult to find absolute proof of these malefactions, as it had been difficult to charge Hanson with the breaking of the dam.

Dal turned to gaze off in the direction of the Carson place. His hands knotted into hard, gnarled fists.

Someone would have to pay for Doc's wounding, he vowed. As his cheek muscles commenced to dance in his mounting anger and agitation, Mary strode up and took his near arm.

"Come to the house and rest, Dal dear," she said softly. "You look worn right out. Marta will take care of Doc until the doctor gets down."

Dal's face became instantly relaxed. He forced a light smile as he accompanied Mary to the log house, peacefully and prettily nestled against its handsome green backdrop of spruce and wild fruit.

THE following noontime, Jim Baldwin brought news that the doctor had arrived at the Carson place. Phil Cody had made extra fast time.

"Must have rid' all night," Dal stated.

He hurried to the corral, caught up a horse and, mounting, bareback, loped off along the creek trail.

Marta Carson met him at the yard.

"Bone's set; tourniquet's off, Dal an'—an' Doc's sleepin' right peaceful." Marta's deep voice gave almost completely.

Dal slipped an arm about her shoulders and hugged her warmly.

"He'll make it, Marta honey," he said. "Don't go to frettin' too much. When that medico from Cody's sober, he's a right brilliant man. Phil around yet?"

Marta sniffed, wiped her eyes on an apron hem and nodded in the direction of the barn.

Dal walked over to join his young friend from the Valley Beyond.

"When I saw the smoke, Dal," Phil said, "I sent the doc on ahead and hurried back to take word to a settler who would carry it to Marshal Syme. He'll organize a posse for sure. They'll be huntin' up this one-eyed geezer, too."

"Good, Phil. You he'ped the doctor set the laig?" Dal asked.

Cody bit hard at his underlip.

"That's right, Dal. I an' Marta. She has more pluck than I have. It was grim, but little Doc took it. You got any plans, Dal? I mean for huntin' down that bushwhacker, or timber cruisin' some other place. I'd admire to side you."

Before Dal could answer, a big man came swinging into the yard. He was Deacon Forster, the new parson. His face was set in a cloudy frown as he fetched up.

"How's, boys!" he boomed. "I've just gotten back from a christenin' to Marquette. Just heard about our little friend Doc. How is he?"

Dal gave him the latest news. He watched the play of emotion expressed in changing expressions in Forster's large face. The Deacon turned to stare at the Carson shack. His lips began to move, frame words.

"Vengeance is mine—saith—the Lord!"

Forster swung to face Baldwin and Cody.

"So saith the Lord!" he said deeply. "An' since I'm His servant, he'd expect me to hunt down this bushwhacker an' bring him to judgment. What can we do, Dal?"

His big voice was quavery with emotion, for Doc Carson was one of his greatest friends.

"We got no proof it wasn't a—uh—huntin' accident, Deacon," Dal answered. "Course, I figure it was deliberate, especially since the firin' uh the timber country followed. We—"

Forster raised his big hands and closed

them slowly, his expression tense.

"If I could get these hands on that jasper, I could mebbeso squeeze truth out of him, Dal," the parson said hoarsely. "Please tell the folks we'll be holdin' a special prayer meet tonight, for Doc. Then I'm ridin' out to the hills. If it's the last thing I do, I aim to track down that sinner, Dal."

With that explosion, Forster turned and walked with long-legged stride to the shack, and Dal smiled with admiration of the big man who, in a crisis, was not above tossing his vestments aside while he took a fighting hand, siding his friends and neighbors.

Dal turned to Phil Cody.

"He means what he said, Phil boy," Dal said slowly. "An' that means I'm ridin' with him. When you git righteous anger an' indignation coupled with he-man pioneer fightin' determination, you got a combination that'll work wonders."

Dal moved to the shack, where, satisfied that Doc was resting as comfortably as was possible, he talked quietly a moment or two with Forster and Marta, then turned back for home.

Never had he been so shaken since coming to Sun Bear Valley; never in all his life had he met a man for whom he had developed a closer regard than his regard for little Doc Carson. But never had he seen little Doc look so ill and completely stove up.

EARLY the next morning, his saddlebags stuffed with food, and a blanket and ground sheet rolled behind the cantle, Dal rode up to join Deacon Forster who, packing Doc's old single action Colt, was mounted on one of Doc's biggest saddle broncs.

They rode steadily up into the hills, beyond the Cody homestead, determined to scour the entire upland country in their efforts to cut sign of Doc's one-eyed bushwhacker. They figured on killing a young buck for fresh meat.

At night they camped in a small clearing in a timber belt, a mile from the roaring forest fire across the big gulch.

The roar of the flames was ominous as they whirred up the resin-coated boles of handsome timber.

"Hades before our very eyes," Forster commented as they sat eating supper.

"The good Lord gave us all the bountiful blessin's of nature—good forests, grass an' the like, an' man, the sinner, sets to work to destroy a heap of it with a single sulphur match!"

They talked together for some time, starting every now and then when a frightened horse snorted and leaped on his tether as a shifting wind sent acrid smoke across the canyon.

"While you're makin' breakfast at dawn, Dal," Forster said, "I'd admire to do some scoutin'. If'n I see a buck, I'll get him. We may be out days."

The Deacon then suggested that Dal roll in.

"I'll wake you when you've had a rest, Dal," Forster added. "I'd admire to set alone, sort of in tune with Almighty God, with heaven here on one side of the canyon, hell on the other."

Dal walked over to talk to the horses a moment before he bedded down. As he came back, he saw the big parson reading from his Bible in the light of the small campfire, and a slow smile of admiration toyed with Dal's mouth. Tomorrow, at dawn, Forster would lay aside the Book, and pick up his trail axe and rifle.

Forster had become one of Sun Bear Valley's greatest acquisitions, a man of whom, at first, little Doc Carson had been keenly jealous, for it was Doc who had conducted the first frontier worship. But Doc had quickly found in Forster a man after his own heart, and so it went for all the other neighbors.

When Dal awakened to stare into the first gray dawnlight, he started. The parson had built a small fire, pushed the lard pail coffee pot in close, and had left.

Dal shuddered as he caught the incessant roar and crackle of the flames, flames fanned by a high, capricious wind. Now and then a louder roar sounded as the flames found old dry timber patches into which its demons rushed with ecstasy.

Dal walked over to feed the horses a quart or two of oats apiece.

Suddenly, above the roar of the fire came

the ringing crack of a rifle.

"Jim's carbine!" he gasped.

Forster was using Jim Baldwin's .30-.30 Winchester.

Dal waited patiently for an hour or more, but the deacon had not returned. His long absence alarmed Dal now. At first he figured Forster had perhaps wounded a buck and was out on its trail.

He decided to take his own Winchester and get out on Forster's trail.

A short time later, as he rounded an outcropping of moss-grown rock, Dal halted, freezing. Across a draw, in a patch of scrub brush he saw something move. At first he took it for a mule deer, but suddenly he gasped. Deacon Forster was hunkered down there, gazing on down to a small lush green flat fringed by buck brush.

Dal followed his friend's gaze, as Forster half rose. A sharp throaty gasp escaped Dal as he saw a man gliding across the grass flat. "One-eye!" he breathed, and cocked his trigger.

But Forster had stirred. Dal watched the big man slide down a bank, hug the overhang and head on toward the flat. Dal followed. He lost sight of the parson, but now picked him up again. He was crouched in a clump of huckleberry scrub, not more than five rods from the one-eyed owlhooter.

DAL now turned his attention to the stranger who was stopped at the edge of the willows, where long matted dry grass of last season's growth lay thick. Suddenly flame gushed.

"Fire-bug!" Dal gasped, lunging forward. The man had set a new fire which could, if it got away, sweep on down toward the Valley Beyond, and to Carson's place.

Deacon Forster had leaped from cover.

"Hold it, you all-fired scoundrel!" he boomed.

The stranger whirled, and leaped toward his rifle which was leaning against a clump of willows. Forster, for all his size, was fast. He leaped in.

"Hold it!" he called. "Stand your hand, or—in the name of the Lord, I'll blast a hole in you!"

The Deacon was moving as he talked. Not ten feet separated him from the man now. He swung to one side, to get between little Doc's bushwhacker and his rifle.

Now Forster laid his own carbine down. Uttering a deep, hollow cry, he leaped.

The one-eyed stranger was lighter, faster. He whipped to one side, slipping a swinging blow aimed at his jaw. Then Dal saw him swing, and as Forster recovered, drive a foot, which almost doubled the big parson up like a half filled sack of oats.

Dal darted forward, but Forster recovered, roaring. As the lighter man attempted to whip by him, the Deacon lunged and butted with his near shoulder, sending the man crashing to the grass.

But Dal could no longer stand and watch. He heard the crackle of the new fire and hurried in to crack off willow switches with which to beat out the flames.

Shortly, Deacon Forster was at his side, swinging, batting, flailing, and in due time they stood watching the smoking, beaten, black scars of the spent fire.

Breathing heavily, Dal turned. The one-eyed man lay prone on the grass flat. Dal turned to Forster. "What in tarnation did you do to him, Deacon?" he asked. "You didn't—kill him—did you?"

A slow mirthless smile toyed with Forster's mouth corners. He shook his head.

"Just put him to sleep a spell, Dal," he answered. "I gave him nothin' to what he'll get if'n he don't talk, tell us the truth, when he wakes up."

They walked across the flat together and rested until at last the stranger stirred, groaning. Forster moved in and helped him to a sitting position, then started to talk.

"Okay now, you sinner, you, we want the truth. You in the pay of Hanson? No lies now, or I'll give you a real workin' over."

Dal watched the man. There was something familiar about his swarthy face.

"What's your—name?" Dal asked.

"Malotte!"

"Mal—uh— Say that agin, mister."

"Malotte. You mebbeso remember my uncle, way back. Him, the little Carson feller, kill heem, bury heem. I promise his wife one day I fin' Carson, an' feex heem."

Dal turned to Deacon Forster. He told

the story of the original Malotte, an uncouth thieving scoundrel who had caused Dal and Mary no end of trouble. Later he had continued his malefactions. Little Doc Carson had read the burial service over him.

"But go ahead, Deacon," Dal said. "Find out how deep the jasper's tied in with Hanson."

Forster resumed his questioning. "Can you write?" Ever go to school?"

"Oui, some, sure. What you want, big man?"

"We know Hanson's at the back of this fire-settin'. Back at our camp, we've got some paper an' a indelible pencil. You're goin' to write out a full statement, confession. Hanson paid you to start the forest fire, huh?"

When the man hesitated, his one good eye wide with concern, Forester half rose, threateningly.

Malotte at last broke down.

"Oui, yes, 'Anson pay me two hunnert dollars. He say it is all right if'n I git Carson, an' mebbeso Bal'win too. Too bad I don't keel Carson. He—"

Forster swung, his huge right fist cocked, but Dal caught at his arm.

"Hold it, Deacon. Don't kill him," he said sharply. "Not until we git that written, signed statement, huh?"

Dal grinned, and Forster lowered his arm.

"Right you are, Dal. Thanks. I—I believe I could have killed him. Now, if you'll haze him on to camp, I'll dress out a yearling buck I shot."

Dal turned to Malotte.

"Okay, Malotte, git to your feet an' march. Reckon you won't try any fool play to escape. I'll have a gun muzzle not far from your back."

The man limped as he walked. Deacon Forster's flying mares had done damage.

Later, they cooked venison steaks, fed themselves and their prisoner well, before moving on back to Sun Bear.

ONE of Frank Syme's deputies was at the Baldwin yard as they rode up. He was glad to take over Malotte.

"You done a stretch for hoss-stealin' a couple of years back, mister. You'll go up for a long stretch this time," the deputy said. He then turned to Baldwin.

"Marshal says to tell you he's telegraphed the Governor whose havin' a train load uh bridge material, fir an' steel, shipped to Cody pronto, Baldwin. You settlers can arrange for the haulin'."

"Splendid!" Forster boomed. "I'll carry word down to Doc Carson right away."

"Seems like we could be startin' on the big cofferdam within a week or so then," Dal said.

"That'll be right up to you Sun Bear Valley folk Baldwin. Hanson figured on over-ridin' the Governor, bringin' pressure to bear through Washin'ton. The faster you all work, the better it's goin' to be. Hanson ain't without influence."

The deputy elected to sleep the night in the haymow, with his prisoner.

Dal hitched a team and drove Mary on over to the Carson place.

Tears trickled down little Doc's seamy face, a face ashen gray through its whisker stubble, as Mary squeezed his hand.

Deacon Forster and his wife were present. They made way for the Baldwins. "Just like half a cure seein' yuh, Mary honey," Doc said huskily, then turned to Dal.

"Deacon's tol' me all the news, Dal," he said. "You'll be drivin' pile, midstream, come the end uh the month, huh?"

There was a noticeable tone of sadness to Doc's voice.

"You look a mite better, Doc," Dal said. "We'll be lookin' for you down at the bridge site, so come along, pardner."

Dal then told of the shipment of fir, and pile timber and steel coming in from the East by railroad. Doc's eyes sparkled.

"Then by the great beard uh Moses! I'll be there, Dal, if'n Deacon has to piggy-back me."

Doc forced a grin, and turned to his wife.

"Reach me my fiddle, honey," he said. "I feel a hymn tune'd set me up a heap."

Shortly, he scraped out a chord and looked up to Mary Baldwin who led off with Doc's old favorite gospel hymn:

"When peace like a river
Attendeth my way . . ."

And then at the close, Deacon Forster raised his right hand and said a short prayer.

Later, along the creek road, Dal turned to his wife. Mary's eyes were moist.

"You're thinkin' Doc don't look as fit as I tried to make out, aren't you, hon?" he asked softly.

Mary nodded. But Dal squeezed her arm.

"I'm layin' a bet Doc'll start to mend just as soon as he gits word we've started piledrivin'," Dal said. "A bullet can break his laig, but not his spirit, for it's the spirit that's held up most frontiersfolk before an' since the end of the Injun wars."

THERE was action at the river. From a heavy log raft a government piledriver was at work. Though most of the work had been turned over to the Sun Bear Valley folk under Dal Baldwin, one government engineer was on hand to act as an adviser.

As two weeks moved swiftly by, the big center cofferdam was piled and rock-filled.

Every now and then Dal Baldwin turned his lean, weather tanned face toward the old south trail. His brows were furrowed with concern, for the news of Doc Carson's progress had not been good of late.

This noon, as the cookhouse steel triangle clanged the "come an' get it" call, Dal turned from the river. He was nearing the camp when he paused at the sound of wagon wheels.

He turned and his heart skipped a beat as he saw Doc Carson's wagon outfit swing around a bend, with Deacon Forster in the drive seat. Dal's eyes widened with concern, until he glimpsed Doc seated in a chair in the wagon box.

Ten days ago the word on Doc hadn't been good, but here he was, and Dal rushed to meet the wagon.

He flung himself up on the side step and laid a hand on Doc's shoulder.

"Doc! By the great gravy! They told me you weren't so good!" Dal called brokenly.

"Eh-h-h—that was just a bout uh grippe hit me, Dal. Marta soon kilt that. Dal, boy, it's like a breath uh heaven to be seein' yuh, an' the river an'—the—coffer. It—why I never expected to see so much done a'-ready!"

Doc was helped down. He was able to navigate on a set of crutches Forster had made for him. He joined the bridge gang for dinner.

That afternoon, with Forster at his side, Doc made it down to the river bank, where his chair was set up so he could sit and watch the crew start to lay out the first big creosoted fir timbers, from cofferdam to right bank. They had rigged a donkey hoist to the big raft. A timber swung into place, but Doc yelled. The government man swung ashore, and Doc told him of a fault.

Together, with Baldwin, and Tom Bruce, the Sun Bear blacksmith, they held a conference. At last the government man shrugged and laid a hand on Doc's shoulder.

"By George, Carson, you're right! I must've been dreaming," he said. He turned to his crew and issued fresh instructions. A heavy bed timber was placed and bolted down on the center support.

Little Doc bit off a cud of tobacco and ground steadily on it a while, his eyes glistening boastfully.

It was less than an hour after supper when Baldwin noticed a party of riders bearing down the north trail toward the river.

"Hanson!" he gasped. "Now I wonder what in tarnation he's got in his craw?"

Deacon Forster took a step or two toward the river bank. Dal watched his big hands clench. "On the prod, d'you think, Dal?" little Doc asked.

"Could be, Doc, but we'll have to let him show his hand. I wonder."

Hanson and his party crossed on the ferry raft. He dismounted and strode right up to Baldwin. He smiled as he fished a folded form from a pocket. "Mebbe you'd best read this, Baldwin," he said. "Go ahead."

Dal's eyes flickered. This was an official document bearing a Washington government seal in its lower right hand corner.

"Writ of—uh—restraint!" he read. "Stay of—proceedin's." He swung to Hanson.

"Why, you all-fired land-grabber, you can't do this!" he boomed. "This bridge is sponsored by the State government, by the Governor himself. It ain't a Federal matter."

Hanson's cold, steely-blue eyes glinted. He spat testily, and chuckled softly.

"If you read it closer, you'll find it's perfectly legal, Baldwin," he said. "It so happens that this sector is preserved by the Federal Government for State road development. It's Washin'ton that'll decide the legality of Ralston's sponsorship of the bridge here!"

Dal's attention was arrested by another party riding down the north trail. He framed a name with his tight lips. That name was Frank Syme. The marshal and sheriff was leading a party down, and between two deputies in the rear rode Malotte!

Hanson turned. He gasped, then bellowed in anger. He swung to the settlers.

"Why, you horntoads! This is your work, you specially, you little runt." He lunged toward Doc Carson, but big Deacon Forster was quicker.

Forster hurled himself in, smashing Hanson to the ground with a shoulder butt.

"Glory be!" he roared. "I've waited just for such a break as this!"

Before Baldwin could do anything to prevent him, Forster had rushed. He clamped a crotch hold on Hanson and lifted him bodily. One of Hanson's men pulled a gun, but Dal was in lightning fast to take it over.

"Stand your hands, all of you!" he called. "Keep your hands crossed on the saddlehorns, or I'll plug you!"

Now he turned. Syme's party was crossing the stream, when Forster heaved the big land development man high, spun him and tossed him into the swirling river.

TOM BRUCE and Forster dragged Hanson to land. Seated near by, little Doc Carson fidgeted in his chair as he grinned wide at Frank Syme who had drawn up. Syme spun around to face Hanson.

"Been huntin' you a long time, Hanson," he said coldly. "Got a warrant for your arrest at last. Here's all the evidence we need in this one-eyed owlhooter who's given us a signed confession implicatin' you."

"Chargin' me with—what?"

"Settin' fire to Federal timberland, an' a —uh—accessory after the crime of attempted murder of Doc Carson. You're under arrest!"

Little Doc half rose in his chair, but Dal Baldwin pressed him gently back.

"Don't go to spoilin' all the good work now, Doc. The State'll take care uh those bushwhackers. We'll need you around here once we swing into real bridgework."

Later, after he and his party had eaten, at the camp mess tent, Frank Syme led his party and prisoners on back to Cody.

Baldwin and his friends watched. Now Dal turned and gripped the Deacon's hand.

"You're a—uh—inspiration, Parson," he said warmly. "You, as much as anyone, pulled Doc through; you showed us just how to mix religion with real he-man action when the chips are down. So thanks a heap, for all the Sun Bear Valley folk."

Deacon Forster blushed.

"Pshaw," he said hoarsely. "You forgit, all of you, that I was born an' raised to the frontier life, same as you. When a rattler's buzzin' in so close you can't jump cl'ar, you got to stomp him down!"

Little Doc made a strange throat sound. His eyes were batting sharply. He turned to stare into midstream where the current changed to fast white water as the heavy cofferdam hit it and split it.

Dal was watching his wiry little friend closely. Shortly, Doc's chin dropped to his chest. His breathing became more regular as he dozed off in the peace and contentment of a brave comeback to the realization of one of his greatest hopes.

"Another week or ten days he'll be hobblin' around with the help of a stick, bossin' the job, Deacon," Dal whispered to Forster. "And that's somethin' you can say a special prayer uh thanks for come Sunday."

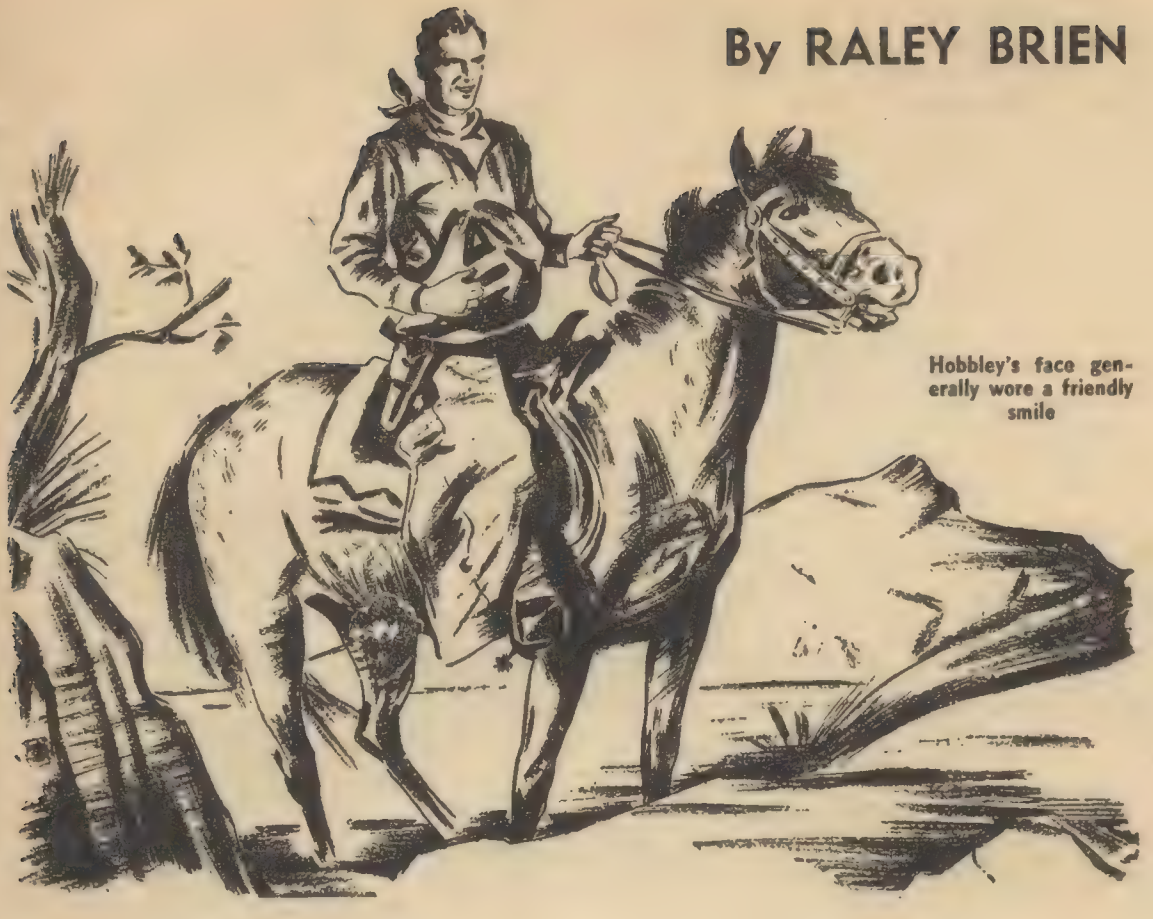
Forster nodded. He was smiling warmly.

"How right you are, Dal. I'll preach a whole sermon about the spirit of little Doc. It'll do the younglin's a heap of good. Now I'll go git his bedroll ready."

Dal strode on to the river bank's rim. Thumbs hooked in his belt he watched the stream swirl endlessly on. No longer in flash flood or full spring freshet flood would it isolate them at Sun Bear.

He lifted his head, eyes toward the far horizon and his lips moved as though silently, secretly, he breathed a prayer of thanksgiving in his own way.

By RALEY BRIEN



Hobbley's face generally wore a friendly smile

Hobbley Wasn't Smiling

An ex-Ranger's six-gun skill comes in handy when the little affair of a burned chicken house pops up!

EARLY that morning, Jim Hobbley loped his horse into the little town of Green Valley and headed for the hitch rail in front of Bert Ellis' general store. The few loafers noticed an unusual thing—Jim Hobbley wasn't smiling.

Generally his even white teeth flashed in a smile that had warmed his neighbors' hearts ever since the day, about three years before, he had bought some land down the valley, built a small house and the usual out-buildings and a corral, and had started a small spread.

He had been a lawman somewhere, it was rumored, and had got shot up and had received some rich rewards for taking into custody some badly wanted men despite the bullets in him at the time. But you'd never have guessed it from his manner. True, he generally wore a gun, but so did the other men

in the district. But he hadn't used it since arriving in Green Valley, except for the extermination of a rattler now and then and an occasional shot at a coyote.

His smile was disarming; it seemed to say he was a man who loved everybody and wanted to be at peace with his neighbors. Since his first social appearance at a barn dance, every unmarried woman on the range and in the town had been sighing, and match-making mothers and aunts had been busy, but without the desired result.

This morning, he waved a careless hand at the loafers and dismounted to tie his pony to the hitch rail. The watchers eyed one another and glanced back at Hobbley. He wasn't smiling! In fact his face had a rather grim expression. His thoughts seemed to be elsewhere. The watchers wondered if some of his stock had died or some other disaster had struck his small new spread.

He removed his riding gauntlets, slapped dust from his shoulders, and stepped up on the walk. He jerked his head from side to side in a swift scrutiny of the street. Only a few persons were in sight. Jim Hobbley was making an early call. It was only nine in the morning, and he seldom came to town before noon.

"Howdy," a couple of the loafers greeted.

"Mornin', gents!" Hobbley replied. But he didn't smile when he said it. He shoved open the door of the store and strode inside.

MIDDLE-AGED, stoop-shouldered Bert Ellis was behind his counter putting merchandise on the shelves. Hobbley stalked up to the counter, nodded in response to Ellis' squeaky greeting, glanced around to see nobody else was in the store, and leaned on the counter.

"Ellis, I want a couple of loads of buildin' material," Hobbley said.

"Sure, Jim. Hope I've got what you want. Goin' to put up somethin' new out at your place?"

Hobbley didn't answer that directly. "I want the stuff loaded and freighted as quick as you can make it, Bert," he continued. "Hire men to load, and I'll pay the bill. Here's a list of stuff, with the footage I want. A lot of two-by-fours, some one-by-twelves, all the rolls of meshed wire you've got, about twenty bags of cement; paint and stuff." He tossed down the list.

"Godfrey!" Ellis ejaculated. "You'll about clean me out, Jim. Homer Buell was expectin' to pick up a lot of that—"

"Buell can wait!" Hobbley snapped, and his eyes snapped also as he spoke. "I'll speak to him. I'll see that you're paid."

"Shucks, Jim, I'm not worryin' about that. You can have the stuff, but I hope Buell won't be too mad. I reckon I can prod a couple of the town loafers into loadin' the wagons and drivin' the mules out to your place.

"The stuff isn't to go to my place," Hobbley said. "What the heck would I do with all that wire and cement and the two-by-fours without a lot of sidin' to go with 'em?"

"Well, I—I was wonderin' about that," Ellis admitted.

"The stuffs' to be trucked to Sam Donner's place."

Bert Ellis' eyes bulged. "Donner startin' to spread out with his chicken farm? You buyin' in with him? Not that it's any of my business."

Jim Hobbley bent across the counter again. "Donner's pens and broodin' sheds and his whole plant—all except the house and barn—was burned last night."

"What?" Ellis' eyes bulged more. "Good heavens! And him in such a poor fix, with a sick wife, and just gettin' a start, and with a crazy business like a chicken farm. Jim, it's noble of you to help him."

"Don't make a mistake. I ain't goin' to pay for this stuff, or for the labor of rebuildin' quick. I told you I'd see you are paid. It'll be good money, so you don't care where it comes from, do you?"

"Well, I don't 'spose I do. But all

this—you've got my head buzzin' so I don't rightly understand anything."

"Hire a couple of the men out in front and start loadin'," Hobbley directed. "Get the mule teams ready, but don't hitch till I give the word. I'll be waitin' for—somebody I want to see."

Then it was that Ellis realized Hobbley hadn't smiled since he had come into the store. And it made the storekeeper slightly nervous to see that Hobbley was continually dropping his right hand to his holster as if he wanted to make sure his gun was still there.

"The fire—how'd it start?" Ellis asked. "And just how bad was it?"

"Everything went except the house and the small barn," Hobbley answered. "Sam Donner and his daughter got some of the pens open and chased a lot of the chickens out, and they're scattered all over the range. They'll take some catchin'. Happened about midnight. I was up tendin' to a sick colt and saw the red sky and rode over—I'm only five miles from their place, as you know. Donner and his girl, Sarah, were tryin' to stop it with a couple of pails and water from the well. And Mrs. Donner bed-ridden—all the excitement won't help her."

"But how— Did a kerosene lamp blow up in one of them broodin' machines? I've always said the only way to raise chickens is to let an old cluckin' hen tend to the job."

Jim Hobbley eyed him for a moment. "The fire didn't start from a lamp, Bert. It was deliberately set. Understand? Case of arson. Donner was deliberately burned out!"

"Godfrey! You're makin' mighty strong talk, Jim."

"I'll back it up," Hobbley replied. "I'll lay proof on the line, if necessary."

HOBBLEY had been rolling a cigarette, and now he struck a match and lit the smoke. Hoofbeats sounded in the street. He glanced through the dirt-streaked store window and saw Homer Buell and his ranch foreman, Al

[*Turn page*]

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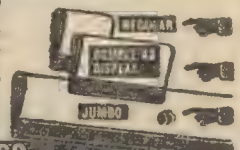

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Norman, dismounting at the hitch rail.

Buell was the big man of the district. He was a middle-aged widower who had built up a big spread by working his wife and his men to death, it was whispered. Now he thought he was the big boss of the Green Valley range, above and beyond the law, and a man whose slightest wish should be taken as an order and receive attention instantly.

Jim Hobbley's face was inscrutable as he loked through the window at Buell. Al Norman, tall and stringy and reputed to be unscrupulous when Buell wished him to be, tied his pony and got up beside Buell on the walk.

"In early," Ellis commented. "Hittin' for Mike Doyle's saloon, I reckon."

"Get busy loadin'," Hobbley said.

Ellis called a couple of the loafers from in front of the store, made a deal with them, and led them out the rear door. Hobbley wandered to the front window and looked out. One of Buell's cowpunchers had just ridden in and was tethering his pony, and another had stopped at the blacksmith shop.

The town was coming alive. A few old men were wandering down the street and a couple of rigs were driving in. A town woman entered the store, and Hobbley went to the back door to call Ellis so he could attend to trade.

"I'll check the loadin'," he told Ellis.

"I didn't tell the men nothin'," Ellis whispered.

Hobbley went out to check the loading, and he urged the men to haste. They thought the stuff was for him, and exerted themselves more than usual. One wagon was loaded and the lumber secured. They began loading the second.

One of Buell's cowpunchers drifted past on his way to Mike Doyle's saloon and watched the work for a moment. After he had gone on, Hobbley went back into the store.

"Loadin' about done," he told Ellis. "Get the mules ready and the drivers. I'll tell you when to hitch."

Out back was a sudden bellow: "Ellis! Get out here!"

"That's Homer Buell yellin'," Ellis said.

"Go see what he wants. I'll be right behind you," Hobbley told him.

Hobbley followed the storekeeper out the back door. Homer Buell was raging.

"What's all this, Ellis?" he demanded. "I want most of that stuff. I told you so last week."

"But you— Well, you didn't send in for it, Mr. Buell, and I got a chance to sell it."

"I ordered the stuff, Buell, for immediate delivery," Hobbley admitted.

"You? What in tarnation you want with all this stuff? Anyhow, I came in this mornin' to order it delivered. You can wait, Hobbley. I need most of this stuff right now—that is, all the lumber and some of the cement. That cussed wire—I don't want that. Don't see why you do, but that's your own business. I'll have the wagons reloaded, Ellis, with what I want. You can order more stuff for Hobbley."

"I've contracted for this and I'll take it," Hobbley said.

"Gettin' big for your pants, ain't you?" Buell snarled.

"Yeah, who in blazes do you think you are, makin' such big talk?" asked Al Norman, stepping up beside Buell.

"Step aside, gents, and I'll do a little explainin'," Hobbley said. "We'll leave the wagons as they are till we get done talkin'."

"I'm not used to takin' orders," Buell stormed.

"Maybe you'll take a few from me," Hobbley suggested.

"You drunk, or plain crazy?" Al Norman put in. "Mr. Buell, you want I should cuff back his ears?"

"Wait, Al," Buell ordered. "Let's hear what Hobbley has to say. Maybe it'll be interestin'."

They walked aside with Hobbley to where the others could not hear.

"Buell," Hobbley said, "Sam Donner's chicken sheds and pens were burned last

[*Turn page*]

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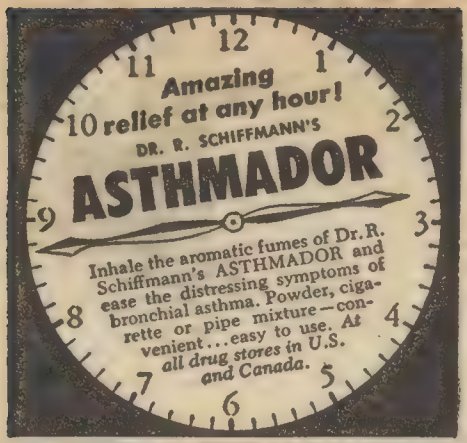
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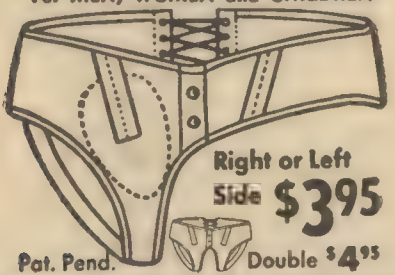

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night, and some of his chickens killed and the others scattered."

"What?" Buell pretended astonishment. Al Norman's face was a mask.

"You ain't very good as an actor, Buell. That wasn't news to you," Hobbley said.

"What you mean by that?"

"Could tell by the way you acted that you knew it before."

"Matter of fact, one of the men did say he'd heard it," Buell said.

"That's strange. I was at the fire last night, and nobody else showed up. We're ten miles on the other side of town. And I was the first man to ride in today from that direction."

"Well—" Buell said. "Not much loss, I guess. Donner's crazy, anyhow. Comin' here on cattle range and startin' a chicken farm! How's he expect to make a livin'?"

"Oh, I thought you knew!" Hobbley said.

"Knew what?"

"Donner used to breed fancy chickens back in Missouri. He came here for his wife's health. Just had money enough, after payin' for doctors and operations, to buy that little place and make a fresh start. He gets fancy prices for them chickens. Sells all he can raise. Now—well, he's burned out, far as his chicken plant is concerned."

"Tough luck, but this is cattle country," Buell said. "Chickens—huh! We let the women raise 'em for fryers and eggs and to get pin mony from any they sell. The idea of a grown man makin' a business of chickens! Anyhow, how'd you think I might know about him raisin' fancy stock to sell?"

"Oh, I thought you might have learned it, Buell, when you were pesterin' around his place makin' eyes at Sarah Donner."

"I—what?" Buell raged.

"It's no secret. You saw her at a barn dance and decided it might be time for you to get married again. I understand she gave you a mighty quick no. Her father was tellin' me that your attitude was it'd be a godsend to her and a comedown for you, but you'd marry her."

"I've had enough of this!" Buell shouted. "So that buildin' material is goin' out to Donner's?"

"That's right."

"I need it worse than he does, and I reckon I'll take it. It won't hurt this range much if he never rebuilds his chicken pens. How'd the fire break out?"

"It was set," Hobbley said.

Buell, and Al Norman beside him, were suddenly tense. Then Buell relaxed slightly. "How'd you know that?" Buell asked. "It's not likely."

"Donner says he heard a horse whinny just before the fire broke out. He looked out a window and saw a rider just leavin' back of the pens."

"Yeah? Recognize the rider?"

"Nope," Hobbley admitted. "Starlight, but no moon. But the rider was the man who'd started the fire. Donner went back to bed, and in a few minutes Sarah began yelling to him that the chicken sheds were afire. They couldn't do much. I saw the light—was up with a sick colt—and rode over there, but it was too late to save anything. No wind—that's what saved the house and barn."

"Well, it's tough, of course," Buell said. "But that's the way things go."

"Sometimes things are helped to go."

"That all you got to say, Hobbley?"

"Nope," Hobbley said. "I notice a couple of your men in town, Buell. I think it'd be nice if you'd send one to your ranch with word for about half a dozen of your punchers to hit for the Donner place—men who can build chicken sheds and pens and fence. I'll have these materials trucked out. We'll start rebuildin' this afternoon."

"My men are all busy," Buell snapped.

"Your men can bed down in my bunkhouse and eat at my place," Hobbley continued. "Maybe the whole thing could be done by tomorrow night or next day. We'll build the plant twice as big as it was before."

"I said my men were busy, Hobbley."

"It'd be a right neighborly act," Hobbley said. "I think it'd be the right thing

[Turn page]

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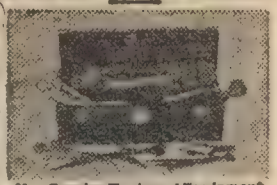

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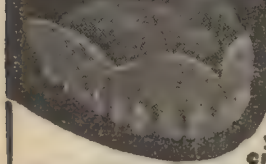

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to do, and I'd appreciate it, and I know the folks of the range would. Especially if they didn't understand everything."

Homer Buell had been regarding Hobbley closely for some time. He noted the change in him. He didn't like the new feeling Hobbley was giving him. And now it came to him—Hobbley's usual smile was missing.

"Aw, let's go to Doyle's and get a drink," Al Norman said. "On your way, Hobbley. Mr. Buell don't want to listen to any more of your nonsense. I'll have the men reload the wagons, Mr. Buell—"

"One moment, Norman!" Hobbley's voice snapped. His eyes narrowed and glinted, and his body tensed. "I haven't been talkin' nonsense, have I, Buell?"

"You seem to be all mixed up about somethin'," Buell said. "Askin' me to do all this—"

"There's more," Hobbley interrupted, his voice low. "All this material that's goin' out to the Donner place for rebuildin'—you're payin' for that. Nobody'll know but Ellis and us, and Ellis won't tell."

"Yeah, you're crazy!" Buell said. "Why should I do all that?"

"All that and more. There'll be brooders and some fancy chicken breedin' stock to buy. Everything's goin' to be replaced double what it was before, and you're payin' the bill."

"Why should I?"

"Before I tell you, I'd better tell you somethin 'else, Buell, so you won't be makin' any mistake about me. I don't want to take advantage of you."

"What now?"

"My name's Jim Hobbley, but that may mean nothin' to you. Not to be braggin', but just to go on record, I spent quite a time down on the Border. I was the Ranger who ran into the José Garcia gang. Remember hearin' of that? They almost got me. But I killed Garcia and three of his men, and after bein' shot up some I held three others till help came. So I ain't the kind of man who'd be much alarmed at any gun-slingin' you and Al Norman might try."

"Why, you—" Buell began.

Hobbley's stare stopped him. "I'll do some more explainin'—I mean about this Donner business. Donner couldn't identify the rider he saw or his pony. But plenty of marks were left behind."

Buell tried to laugh. "I suppose you mean there were hoofprints that could be identified."

"Plenty of hoofprints, but they look like any a shod pony might leave. No broken shoe, or anything like that, Buell. The man who set fire to the sheds tied his pony to a stunted tree a short distance away. Tracks look like the pony was there for some time. I reckon that pony must have some skin trouble on his neck. Plain to see where he rubbed his neck against the trunk of the little tree. Lot of hairs caught in the bark.

"I noticed when you rode into town that your pony has a sore neck and has rubbed off a mess of hair. Your pony's that little roan you ride so much. And the hairs in the bark of the tree—well, Buell, they check with your pony."

Buell drew in his breath sharply. Then his right hand streaked for his holster. But before he could clear leather with his gun he felt the muzzle of Jim Hobbley's gun jammed against his stomach. The draw had been so swift that Buell had not seen it. He lifted his hands.

"Ranger service remember, Buell?" Hobbley asked. "I could have killed you just now. Take it easy. If you'd got me, the Law'd have got you, because the evidence I mentioned is known elsewhere. I don't like to compound a felony, Buell, but let's just say in this case that it'd be better to get Donner straightened out and helped at yore expense. You caused the damage, you know. My word'd go a long way in court, Buell, with my official record behind it."

"Why should I have done such a thing?"

"Because somebody refused to jump when you snapped your fingers, Buell. Because Sarah Donner wouldn't marry you. A little cheap revenge. Burn 'em out. Break 'em. Bring anguish to Donner and his sick wife and his daughter.

[*Turn page*]

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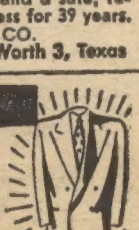
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You're pretty low, Buell. I should have shot you."

It became plain that Al Norman was in Buell's confidence about the affair. For Norman, thinking Hobbley's attention was centered on Buell, went for his gun. A quick shot, Hobbley with his own gun drawn, a tale afterward of self-defense—it was a perfect setup.

There came the quick bark of a gun and Al Norman's weapon dropped to the ground. He reeled backward.

"Bad try, Norman," Hobbley said. "Well, Buell?"

"I—I'll do all you said," Buell replied. "Some men are runnin' this way."

"We were cuttin' up, and I shot Norman by accident," Jim Hobbley said quickly. "Don't make any bad moves now, Buell. It'll be a prison term for arson if you do. Send for your men to Donner's with tools, like I said."

"Why are you so interested in this business, anyhow?" Buell asked.

"Oh, I want to see Donner get along, and his wife get well. Donner's sister is comin' out to keep house for him and help him with his chickens, like she did back in Missouri. Because Sarah won't be livin' there after a few months. We're goin' to be married, Sarah and me."

An expression of genuine astonishment spread over Buell's face.

"It's no more'n right," Hobbley continued, "that you pay for rightin' the damage you caused. Hittin' you in the pocketbook hurts you almost as bad as five years in prison, I reckon. I could take care of the Donners, but I'll need all my money for my own spread. And it's right you should pay."

"You win, Hobbley," Buell whispered.

"And be careful of gettin' any ideas about handlin' me later," Hobbley said. "Handle your man Norman, too, or I'll take on the job myself."

"There'll be no trouble."

"You're sensible, Buell. Oh—uh—Sarah and me had quite a laugh about your high-handed courtin'."

Hobbley looked straight at him again —and smiled.

—Continued from Back Cover

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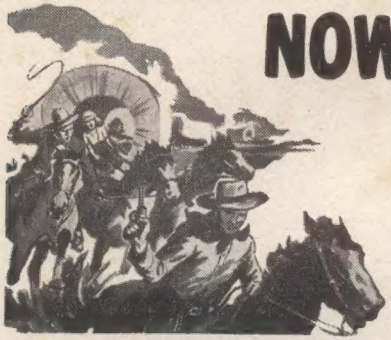

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